



COMPROMISING
Situations
CAROLYNN CAREY

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**(Winner, National Readers' Choice Award,
Regency category, 2007)**

by

Carolynn Carey

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About the Author

Three of Carolynn Carey's manuscripts were finalists in the Golden Heart contest of the Romance Writers of America before her first book (*A Summer Sentence*) was published in 2005. That book, a contemporary, was a finalist in the HOLT Medallion contest and in the Gayle Wilson Award of Excellence Contest as well as placing first in the traditional category of the Romance Writers Ink contest. This book, her first published historical novel, won the 2007 National Readers' Choice Award in the Regency category and the 2008 Laurie Award for Published Authors. More recently, two of her novels won in their categories in the HOLT Medallion contest of 2014: *The Forgotten Christmas Tree* in Short Contemporary and *My Cupcake, My Love* in Romance Novella.

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Chapter One

There were days when Beatrice Crowell couldn't help but wish the gods had been a bit more evenhanded in their distribution of gifts when she and her twin sister were conceived. Beatrice didn't mind that Chloe was the twin who had been gifted with beauty, intelligence and a genial nature. But she did wish the gods had seen fit to endow her sister with just a smidgeon of common sense.

"Tedious girl," Beatrice muttered, hurrying down the front staircase of her parents' country dwelling. "Where can Chloe be? Obviously she has forgotten that Lady Thayne is visiting us this afternoon."

Beatrice paused in the entrance hall, unconsciously glaring at the ancient tapestries as though they had conspired to hide Chloe beneath their musty threads. Then, hearing a footfall in the hallway, she turned to gaze down the dim corridor, only to heave a heavy sigh when she recognized the silhouette of the family's longtime butler.

Witcomb stepped into the entrance hall, his round face brightened by his habitual cheerful expression. "Good afternoon, Miss Beatrice. Now don't you look a picture today? You remind me of your paternal grandmother, who had just such sparkling green eyes. And your new gown is most becoming, if I may be permitted to say so. I'm sure Lady Thayne will approve."

Beatrice smiled her thanks. Never one to indulge in false modesty, she realized the emerald green of her gown brought out the few auburn highlights lurking among her dark curls. She also knew that the soft muslin dropping from a high waist showed her slender form to advantage. In only this one feature could she suppose herself superior to her beautiful blonde twin, who was two inches shorter and a little less slender.

But Beatrice's smile faded immediately. "I'm looking for Chloe to remind her that our godmother is visiting us this afternoon. She isn't with our mother and she hasn't rung for Betty to help her dress. Have you seen her?"

"Not since she returned from her visit to the vicarage, Miss Beatrice. And that was two hours ago."

"The vicarage? Aha! Then I'll bet you a monkey she's in the library," Beatrice said, unconsciously emulating the country squire speech she had learned from her father. "The vicar is forever asking her to research some point for one of his sermons." Turning on the

toes of her new satin slippers, she marched down the hall and into the library.

“Chloe! I knew I’d find you here. What, pray tell, are you doing?”

Chloe looked up from her book and smiled. “Reading, as I am sure you have surmised, my dear sister. Why are you angry with me this time?”

Beatrice’s frown faded. It was impossible to stay mad at her twin for long. Chloe had only to look up with those startling blue eyes and her sweet smile and Beatrice would forgive her almost anything. After all, it was not Chloe’s fault that the gods had seen fit to saddle her with both a high degree of intelligence and an extremely amiable nature—two attributes that, in Beatrice’s opinion, should never be coupled. Geniuses, she believed, should be amply endowed with cynicism so they could repel any hangers-on who preferred picking others’ brains to thinking for themselves.

“Has the vicar asked you to find another quotation for him?” Beatrice’s gaze rested on the stack of books beside her sister’s chair.

“How did you guess, dearest? I am happy to help, of course. Unfortunately, quotations on humility are proving unusually difficult to find. Perhaps you could suggest... No, never mind.”

“Exactly,” Beatrice muttered. She was not known for being bookish. “Chloe, you are not dressed yet and it is almost time for our godmother to arrive.”

“But Lady Thayne isn’t scheduled to visit until tomorrow,” Chloe said, raising her eyebrows.

Beatrice wrinkled her nose at her sister. “I said yesterday that our godmother would be coming tomorrow. Now today *is* tomorrow.”

Chloe heaved a deep sigh. “Today is tomorrow? Really, Bea! I am positive that you spout these silly lapses of logic merely to irritate me.”

“Of course I do,” Beatrice said, grinning. “You, on the other hand, succeed in irritating me without even trying. You know how much Lady Thayne’s visits mean to Mama, yet you sit here in your old woolen gown searching for a quotation when you should be getting dressed.”

Chloe jumped to her feet. “Forgive me, Bea.” She tilted her head to one side and frowned. “Oh dear, I believe I hear a carriage approaching. Is Mama receiving in the drawing room?”

“No. She would have liked to do so, but she is experiencing a great deal of pain today, so I reminded her that Lady Thayne does not expect to be formally entertained. Now hurry, Chloe. I’ll greet Lady Thayne and accompany her to Mama’s sitting room. You can join us there when you have changed your gown.”

Two minutes later, Beatrice stood on the front porch of Crowell Manor while a footman lowered the steps of the Marchioness of Thayne's traveling coach. Within seconds, that lady, elegantly attired in a soft gray carriage dress, had descended and hurried to embrace Beatrice.

"My dear Bea, you look charming today. That shade of green makes your eyes positively sparkle. And Chloe, I know, will be wearing blue to highlight *her* glorious eyes. Your mother has always exhibited exquisite taste. Speaking of your mother, how is my dearest Catherine?"

"In pain, as always," Beatrice said. "But the local physician assures us that other than this disease affecting her joints, Mama is in excellent health."

"That is some consolation, I suppose," Lady Thayne said, wrapping her arm about Beatrice's waist as they stepped into the entrance hall where Witcomb stood at attention, waiting to escort them to Mrs. Crowell's sitting room. "And your papa, how is he?"

"As hale as ever. He sends his regards and his regrets. He had arranged to be in Northumberland today to buy a horse and could not change his plans."

"Nor would I have wished him to do so. Pray tell him that I understand completely. No man enjoys hearing his wife and her dearest friend reminisce about their youth, especially when those recollections involve tales of numerous suitors who have since gone on to great and glorious achievements."

Beatrice chuckled and fell into step beside her godmother, who followed Witcomb up the carpeted stairs. "I shall certainly relay your message, my lady. Word for word."

"Much your papa will care." Lady Thayne smiled. "He knows very well that your mother has never loved anyone but him. And he has always appeared to worship her. I assume he still does."

"Unequivocally," Beatrice said. "Her illness distresses him more than he allows most people to know. As a matter of fact—and this is confidential—there is no horse in Northumberland. At least not one that Papa wishes to inspect. He has gone there in search of a doctor who supposedly has found a cure for illnesses similar to Mama's. I fear Papa is in for another disappointment, but he refuses to stop trying. It breaks his heart to see her in so much pain."

"Speaking of broken hearts..." Lady Thayne pulled Beatrice to a stop on the landing and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Has your Mama heard from Richard lately?"

Beatrice was annoyed to feel her face flushing. Her elder brother's name was rarely mentioned at Crowell Manor, nor had it been since

he had sold out of the army two years before, after saying he had no taste for the military life. He had not returned to Crowell Manor since that time, and his activities reportedly involved a devotion to pleasure and dissipation in some of the most notorious sections of London. Still, Beatrice refused to allow her brother's dissolute reputation to abash her. Lifting her chin, she looked directly into her godmother's eyes. "No, my lady. Mama hears nothing from Richard, nor does she ask about him."

Lady Thayne sighed. "Then I shall not mention him either, for Catherine has enough grief without my adding to it."

Beatrice, who had always adored her dynamic and charming older brother, could not stop herself from asking, "Do you ever see or hear of Richard, my lady?"

"I never see him, my dear," Lady Thayne replied with a slight shake of her head. "He no longer moves in my circles, you understand. However, I do occasionally hear of him. Some say Richard has won a fortune at gambling while others say he has lost a fortune. The only thing on which everyone agrees is that he lives constantly on the edge of ruin. Still, no one seems to have tangible knowledge of his activities. I would not tell you these hurtful things about your brother, Bea, did I not know how strong you are and did I not hope that you would soon be... But I move too quickly, as usual. Let us go, my dear. Your Mama will be wondering what has happened to us."

The marchioness turned and hurried up the remaining stairs, leaving a puzzled Beatrice to follow in her wake.

Even at the age of forty-eight, Catherine Crowell retained much of the golden beauty that had made her a favorite of the *ton* during her come-out more than a quarter of a century before. Although the young Catherine had been the daughter of a mere baron and had possessed no more than a modest dowry, she had won the hearts of a duke, a marquess and an earl. Her own heart had been claimed by the third son of a viscount—a handsome man with few prospects until his paternal great-aunt died and bequeathed him Crowell Manor and a tidy fortune to go with it.

That bequest had delivered a fatal blow to the strained relationship between Jonathan Crowell and his family, who accused Jonathan of using his considerable charms to influence their elderly relative. Jonathan's explanation that Aunt Sarah had considered him the only family member who was neither a prig nor a bore had done nothing to heal the breach. Communications between Jonathan and his family had been severed long before he moved his new bride into Crowell Manor.

Catherine's own family had been annihilated by a cholera epidemic shortly after her marriage. She had grieved for her parents and for the two young brothers she had lost, along with the passing of her childhood home into the hands of a distant cousin, but time and the birth of her son had eventually revived her joy in living. That joy continued unabated despite the painful disease that had attacked her joints within five years of the birth of her twin girls.

Today, although Catherine Crowell was reclining on a chaise in her sitting room, her joyous smile and sparkling blue eyes proclaimed her delight at seeing her oldest friend again. "My dear Sophia. Forgive me for not rising. You find me unusually indolent today. It is so wonderful to see you. I do wish Jonathan could have been here. He has always adored you, you know."

Lady Thayne hurried to embrace the woman who had once shared with her the anxieties of a first Season. At that time, Lady Thayne had been plain Sophia Sumner, neither beautiful nor especially winsome. The marchioness still claimed that had she not been a friend of Catherine's, she would never have come to the attention of the Marquess of Thayne. Lord Thayne, an eager member of Catherine's court, had been too well-bred to neglect her plain and diffident friend. His unfailing courtesy had eventually encouraged Miss Sumner to conquer her shyness, and, as her personality blossomed, Lord Thayne's consideration changed first to regard and then to love. The two soon adored each other—an adoration that survived until death robbed the marchioness of her husband fifteen years after they were wed.

"Catherine," Lady Thayne said. "You are as beautiful as ever. You may tell Jonathan for me that he is the luckiest man in the kingdom. Ah, here is Chloe. Come give me a kiss, dear girl, and then sit down so we can have a comfortable coze. It seems an age since I've seen you all, even though it has been only two months. I do wish I could get down from London more often, but with the Season approaching... Which reminds me. Catherine, I have a particular favor I wish to ask of you."

"You know, my dear, that I would do anything within my power. What is it?"

"First I must explain that Nicholas has announced he will spend the Season at Chiloath this year. I suspect he merely wishes to visit his country estate because he is tired of life in London. He is the dearest son imaginable, but unfortunately he lacks his father's delight in society."

"Which explains, I suppose, why your son and my daughters have never met," Catherine said.

Lady Thayne's eyes widened. "Have they not? I had not realized.

How strange that you and I are so close and yet our offspring are unacquainted."

"Not so strange, perhaps," Catherine said, "what with Nicholas being away at school for so many years and the twins being marooned in the countryside with me."

"Which brings me to the favor I wish to ask. You see, with Nicholas away, I shall be alone and... No, it is too much to expect of you."

"For heaven's sake, Sophia, I've never known you to be reticent. One would think you were about to ask me for one of my arms."

"Perhaps I am, my dear. Both of them, in fact. What I am requesting is the honor and pleasure of introducing your two lovely daughters to society."

Five minutes later when Catherine Crowell's exclamations of appreciation had subsided, her eyes still sparkled with joy. "How can I ever thank you, Sophia? I had dreamed, of course, of Chloe and Beatrice making their come-out, but with my family gone and Jonathan estranged from his, I had just about given up hope. But now! Well, if my girls are in *your* care, I know I could not ask for more."

While their mother continued to proffer her thanks and chatter about her delight at the thought of her daughters having a Season, Beatrice and Chloe, with no small degree of consternation, stared into each other's eyes. Despite their differences in appearance and personality, the twins frequently shared similar thoughts. Today they were wondering how they could refuse their godmother's offer without disappointing their mother.

Beatrice was the first to conclude that a refusal would be impossible. Although their mother had never complained, it had been obvious for the past two years that she was deeply grieved because her daughters were to be deprived of a come-out due to her illness. It would never have occurred to Catherine Crowell that her daughters might regard a Season with dismay.

Beatrice forced a smile and thanked Lady Thayne, trying to sound appreciative despite her misgivings. She could not explain that she had neither the desire nor the need for a Season. She had decided she would not marry. She was simply too busy. As her mother's illness had worsened, Beatrice had gradually taken over many of the responsibilities at Crowell Manor. Chloe was of little help—not because she was unwilling, but because she often grew so immersed in her own thoughts that she forgot there was anyone else in the house. Of course, if Richard had not gone bad... But there was no sense in fretting about something she could not change.

In the meantime, she realized, she and Chloe could do nothing

that would bring their mother greater pleasure than to pretend delight at the thought of this proposed Season in London. And although she did not expect to enjoy herself, Beatrice knew that for her mother's sake, she would cheerfully tolerate this unnecessary introduction to society. She was less sure of Chloe's ability to endure a Season.

Glancing at her sister, Beatrice saw that Chloe was already following her lead by smiling and sweetly accepting Lady Thayne's invitation. Beatrice also noted that her sister's face had grown pale and her hands trembled where they lay clasped tightly in her lap.

Obviously Chloe still loved the man who had so assiduously courted her last year in Bath and then, for no apparent reason, had given her the cut direct. Although Chloe had said little about the fellow since their return from Bath, Beatrice had seen the hurt buried deep in her sister's eyes. She was aware that Chloe had spent the past ten months trying to purge the Earl of Randson from her memories. She was also aware that Randson was as close as a son to the Marchioness of Thayne and that Chloe would no doubt be forced to endure his company while they were in London.

But he had best be very careful not to hurt Chloe again, Beatrice thought. She might grow infuriated with Chloe herself, but she would not stand by and allow Chloe's sweet nature to leave her exposed to additional slights from the Earl of Randson—or from anyone else, for that matter. Although Chloe was far too kind to seek revenge, Beatrice felt no such qualms. In fact, she had long ago appointed herself as her sister's keeper, and she was willing to do whatever was necessary to protect Chloe...and to avenge her when the need arose.

Chapter Two

Two weeks later, Beatrice and Chloe stared wide-eyed through the window of their father's traveling coach as it slowed to a stop in front of Lady Thayne's town house. It had been many years since the girls had visited London, and Beatrice had to admit that despite her earlier misgivings, she was finding the trip exhilarating. She did not recall that London had been so crowded during her last visit some ten years earlier. Nor had she been conscious then of the city's intriguing aura of vitality. Beatrice felt herself falling in love with the intangible appeal of a city that reflected more diversity than even she and her twin could boast.

The arrival of the Crowell twins created a bustle of activity. A footman hurried to let down the carriage steps and help Beatrice and Chloe descend into the street. Within seconds, Lady Thayne dashed out to meet them, and, after hugs all around, she gently herded them toward the front door.

"My darling girls," she said, her smile wide. "How anxiously I have been awaiting your arrival. You cannot imagine my joy at the prospect of presenting you to my friends. Not having daughters of my own has always been one of my greatest regrets, but I shall pretend for the next few weeks that you both belong to me. We shall have the most wonderful time, and you can write your mother every day and tell her about our activities."

Lady Thayne chattered nonstop while leading the twins, one on each arm, into the entrance hall. The room was large and elegantly decorated. Pools of colored light were reflected on the white marble floor as the afternoon sun poured through the stained-glass window above the double doors. White walls soared to a high ceiling that boasted gilt-trimmed carvings and a crystal chandelier. In the background, a curving mahogany staircase provided dark contrast to the abundance of white.

"How lovely," Chloe said, looking about her.

"Thank you, my dear. I must confess to a bit of pride in my decorating. My husband allowed me a free hand with the place when we first married. The house was so gloomy then, with age-darkened walls and massive old furniture. I could hardly wait to lighten it up a bit. I have not been displeased with the results."

"I should think not," Beatrice agreed. Her gaze rested for a second on a shiny suit of armor propped in a corner, then moved on to the

landscapes that lined the walls. "And the paintings are so colorful. Mama has always told us that you possess great talent for art. Tell me, my lady, did you by chance—?"

A commotion at the front of the house caused Beatrice to stop in mid-sentence and turn toward the doorway. She heard the butler babbling something about "unexpected" while a footman hurried to relieve a gentleman of his gloves and hat.

The new arrival stood just inside the hall, looking around with brilliantly blue eyes and lowered black brows. He was a tall man who held himself rigidly, his broad shoulders square and his firm chin high. He appeared to look down his straight nose while his gaze swept the room. His stern expression softened perceptibly when his gaze found Lady Thayne, whose raised brows spoke of her surprise.

"Nicholas, my dear." A smile brightened Lady Thayne's face. "How wonderful to see you. But I thought you were settled in Chiloath. What brings you to London?"

"A bit of family business." The Marquess of Thayne hurried to take his mother's outstretched hands. "I trust I find you well."

"Better than well," Lady Thayne said. "You find me ecstatic. As you can see, I have guests. You must allow me to introduce you to my goddaughters, Beatrice and Chloe Crowell. Their mother is allowing me the pleasure of presenting the twins this Season."

Beatrice was perfectly aware that she had been staring at her godmother's son. And how could she resist? If Chloe represented feminine perfection, surely this gentleman was her equal in masculine beauty. His dark hair framed a face that was as potently handsome as any that had ever been sculpted in the image of a god. His eyes, an incongruously bright blue, shone like pieces of stained glass and his lips were firm but well shaped.

The smile that had brightened Thayne's features when he greeted his mother faded when he turned to Beatrice and Chloe. His brows shot up and his gaze passed over Beatrice as though she were naught but another suit of armor cluttering up his entrance hall.

Beatrice suppressed a sigh when she realized that Thayne's gaze had paused on her sister's lovely face. She had grown accustomed over the years to being ignored when Chloe was nearby, and she had never before felt the least bit slighted. Rather, she had welcomed being spared men's fatuous stares of amazed admiration. Today, however, she was forced to admit to a stab of jealousy when Thayne's attention passed over her to light on Chloe.

With a silent sigh, Beatrice watched Thayne closely, waiting for the half-muffled gasp and stunned expression that usually followed a gentleman's first glimpse of Chloe's ethereal beauty. But Thayne's

reactions, she soon realized, were quite different from most men's. Beatrice blinked, disbelieving, when she saw that Thayne had lifted one elegantly clad foot and placed a toe toward the side, apparently preparing to spin around and turn his back on Chloe. There was no doubt in Beatrice's mind that Thayne was about to deliver the cut direct to her poor sister.

Too stunned at first to do more than gape, Beatrice watched as Chloe dropped her gaze to the floor, her face flushing and then growing pale. Furious that her sweet and inoffensive sister was about to be subjected to such treatment, Beatrice took one quick step forward, planting herself between Chloe and her oppressor.

The Marquess of Thayne allowed a tiny smile to tease the corners of his lips when he saw that the unbelievably beautiful female in his entrance hall had correctly interpreted his contempt for her. He could not help but be pleased that the lovely Chloe had wilted beneath his scathing gaze.

Then, frustratingly, the other one—the ordinary, brown-haired twin—stepped in front of her sister and subjected him to a gaze that was every bit as scathing as his own. Be damned! Who did this plain little chit from the country think she was to regard him with such blatant disrespect?

More accustomed to females who fawned over him than to young ladies whose luminous eyes clearly communicated a desire to murder him, Thayne was well practiced in the art of suppressing pretension. With eyebrows raised so high they touched the dark lock of hair that had fallen onto his forehead, he subjected the scowling twin to his most disdainful smile.

That smile froze in place when he realized the young lady was not going to drop her gaze. She continued to glare at him, looking down her slightly upturned nose as though she were observing a particularly repugnant toad.

Infuriated, Thayne realized his only recourse was to ignore the girl. Lifting his own nose a notch higher, he turned to address his mother. "I regret having interrupted your reception of guests, madam, but I must ask that you join me in the library for a few minutes on urgent business."

A tiny frown furrowed Lady Thayne's brow. "Certainly, Nicholas. I shall be with you as soon as I have shown Beatrice and Chloe to their chamber."

"I need to see you immediately. Perhaps the young ladies could await you here."

Lady Thayne's frown deepened, and her tone when she addressed

her son was severe. “Obviously you are not aware, Nicholas, that the girls have been traveling since early morning and are no doubt weary from their journey. If you will await me in the library, I shall ask Mrs. Jamison to escort Beatrice and Chloe to their chamber where they can rest while you and I discuss this business that has brought you rushing back to town.”

Thayne sighed. “As you wish, madam.” He turned and strode down the hallway to the library, closing the door firmly behind him.

Ten minutes passed before the marchioness tapped lightly on the library door and then entered. Thayne had spent the time pacing from one side of the room to the other. He did not look forward to the coming interview with his mother. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her. Yet he feared if he did not speak, she might be hurt even more in the upcoming Season.

He paused in his pacing and turned toward his mother. She had never been a beauty, yet her very presence had always been a boon to his spirits. She was everything a mother should be, he was convinced, and he had tried his best to take care of her since his father had died so unexpectedly.

Having come into the title when he was barely thirteen, the marquess was aware that he had been both too young and too old when his father died—too young to know how to deal with so much sorrow and too old to feel comfortable with expressing his grief. He had responded by becoming solitary and overly serious, but he could not help himself. His mother, he knew, had tried to comfort him in spite of her own deep sadness, and he would always love her for it, but even her best efforts could not replicate the joy and contentment he had always felt in his father’s company.

Now he was about to give her news that would rob her of the pleasure she had anticipated for the upcoming Season.

“Hello, Mother. Won’t you be seated?” Thayne waved toward a chair near the window. His mother, he noted, wore a severe expression. Obviously she was still irritated with him. She nodded regally before taking her seat.

Thayne blew out a sigh, then seated himself and took a deep breath. He hardly knew where to begin.

His mother spoke first. “I don’t wish to appear rude, Nicholas, but I’m in rather a hurry to return to my guests, so I must ask that we get on with our conversation. What is this urgent family business that has brought you rushing back to London?”

“That can wait for a minute, Mother. First I must tell you that I, unfortunately, cannot have those two girls residing in my home.”

“What?” Lady Thayne’s fingers tightened around the silk-covered arms of her chair. She half rose and then dropped back into her seat. “I must have misunderstood you, Nicholas. I thought you said you did not want Beatrice and Chloe living here.”

“I am very sorry if this distresses you, Mother. I realize that Catherine Crowell is an old friend of yours, but I simply will not tolerate her daughters living under my roof.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“I wish you had seen fit to apprise me of your plans. I would have warned you against associating with those girls. Now I realize I should have confided in you sooner, but I had thought to protect you. You see, the blonde, Chloe I believe her name is...well... Blast! I hardly know how to express this. Let me just say that she is no better than she should be.”

“Nicholas, how can you even hint at such a thing? I have known those two girls since they were babes, and I would stake my own reputation on their being perfect ladies.”

Thayne grimaced. “I know, Mother. I am aware of your deep regard for them. However, I assure you that I have heard from an unimpeachable source that less than a year ago, Chloe Crowell was sneaking out of her home at night to meet a lover.”

Thayne watched his mother’s lips thin and realized she would not give in easily. “I don’t believe it,” she said. “Someone has lied to you. I do not know who, but someone has grossly misled you about dear little Chloe.”

Thayne sighed, then stood and walked to a sideboard where he poured himself a generous measure of brandy. “Will you take a glass of sherry, Mother?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Neither spoke until Thayne handed his mother a glass and reseated himself. “Are you aware, Mother, that Randson accompanied his mother to Bath last year?”

“Yes. As I recall, both Randson and his mother resided there for nearly three months, and the countess returned claiming the place had not alleviated her ailments at all.”

“That is correct. Do you also recall that Catherine Crowell spent time in Bath last year?”

“Yes, and her family accompanied her. Nicholas! Surely you are not implying that your closest friend would say such terrible—”

“Please, Mother. Forgive me for interrupting you, but since it is clear that I must relate to you the full story, I would prefer telling it in my own way.”

His mother frowned but nodded her agreement.

“While in Bath, Randson met and fell in love with Chloe Crowell. He wrote me letters praising her beauty, her intelligence, her sweetness. He was positive he had found the woman he wanted to marry, and he hinted as much to Miss Crowell. She gave every indication of returning his regard. Then one evening, Randson had been visiting friends and was walking home a little later than usual. Being silly, as only those who are deeply in love can be, he decided to walk past the Crowell’s residence so he could look at the window behind which he knew his beloved would be sleeping.

“He had been standing for a few seconds staring up at her window when he saw someone slipping out of the house. Thinking it would be a servant, he stepped back into the shadows, hoping his presence would go unnoticed. When he realized it was Miss Chloe, he first thought she had somehow noticed him and was coming to see what he wanted. Then he saw a man approaching, and he watched as Chloe Crowell flung herself into the stranger’s arms. They embraced for a few seconds, then turned and hurried away.”

Lady Thayne said nothing for a few seconds, then sighed. “So that is why Randson has seemed so despondent these last few months.”

“Yes. He was devastated to learn that the woman he loved is naught but a heartless flirt with the morals of a... Never mind.”

“Did Randson confront Chloe? Did he ask her whom she was meeting?”

“Of course not. Do you suppose she would have told him the truth? He did not think so, and he could not endure listening to her lies.”

“How, then, did he explain discontinuing his courtship of her?”

“He did not feel obliged to explain anything to a woman of such low morals. The next time he saw her, he gave her the cut direct.”

“Ah.”

“What does ‘ah’ mean, Mother?”

“It means that I suddenly understand the anguish I have sometimes detected in Chloe’s eyes. I tell you now, Nicholas, that Chloe has been hurt as deeply as Randson. He should have given her an opportunity to explain. Since he did not, I think we owe her the courtesy of asking her now what happened that evening.”

“No, Mother, that is impossible. Randson never intended to tell me what happened in Bath. He let something slip one evening when he was especially unhappy and was in his cups. I insisted he tell me the whole, but it was in strict confidence. I’m sure he wouldn’t object to my telling you so you’ll be aware of the danger of associating with Chloe Crowell, but I cannot betray his trust by telling Miss Crowell, and I must ask you to honor his wishes in this also.”

“Very well, Nicholas. But I refuse to convict Chloe without giving her an opportunity to defend herself. Until she has a chance to tell her side of the story, I shall assume she is innocent and will continue with my plans to present her and Beatrice.”

Thayne blew out his breath in a deep sigh while his grasp tightened around the glass until his knuckles turned white. “I do not want to risk your getting hurt too, Mother. I know you mean well, but what if Miss Chloe or even that other one—the dark-haired one—creates a scandal while in your care?”

“I do not believe that will happen, but even if it did, I suspect my own consequence is such that I could withstand a bit of scandal.”

“No doubt, but I have watched Randson suffer these last months and I have no desire to see you do the same if I can prevent it. This is my house, and I refuse to allow those girls to live here.”

Although her face paled, his mother lifted her chin and stared calmly into Thayne’s eyes. “That is your prerogative, Nicholas. We shall move out tomorrow morning. Unless, of course, you prefer that we leave today.”

“We?” Thayne groaned inwardly. He wondered if perhaps his ultimatum had been hasty, but he would prefer not to back down. He lifted his chin. “Mother, I hope you do not expect me to change my mind because of your implied threat.”

“Of course not, dearest.” His mother smiled calmly, stood and moved to stand beside him. “And I hope you do not expect me to change my mind because you have chosen to perceive my statement of fact as a threat.”

Thayne jumped to his feet, aware that this interview had slipped out of his control. He grasped his mother’s hands. “I’m sorry, Mother. I should not have said that to you.”

“That is true, dear. However, we shall pretend that you did not. Now listen to me, Nicholas, for what I am about to tell you is critical to your understanding of why I shall move out of your house. You spoke a few moments ago of honoring a friend’s trust. If you have ever given the matter any thought, I am sure you realize that women too are capable of such feelings. I have promised my dearest friend to present her daughters this Season, and nothing short of my own death will prevent me from doing so. Thus, the girls and I shall move into Grillon’s tomorrow while I begin looking about for a house to lease. As you are well aware, your father provided me with a generous jointure, and I shall not find it necessary to call on you for financial support. Now if you will excuse me, I must explain to the girls that we shall be moving.”

“Mother, please wait.” Thayne silently cursed his stupidity. He

had forgotten the extent of his mother's loyalty to family and friends. "I am undoubtedly a fool. Of course I cannot expect you to break a promise to Mrs. Crowell. Although Randson will be unhappy to learn that Chloe Crowell is living here, I shall explain the situation to him. Thank goodness he is spending a few more weeks with his mother in the country. Now no more talk of moving out. Please."

His mother hesitated for several seconds. Finally she spoke. "Very well, Nicholas. We shall stay for the present, but if you become uncomfortable in the future..."

"I won't," Thayne said immediately. "On the contrary, I could not be comfortable in this house without you. After all, it was your home long before it was mine. Which reminds me, I have not yet shared with you the bit of family news that necessitated my return from the country. I think you will be every bit as dumbfounded as I was."

Chapter Three

Beatrice was accustomed to pulling her sometimes irresponsible sister out of the briars, but rarely had she felt such total frustration with her. Pacing from one side of their bedchamber to the other, Beatrice first complained about the Marquess of Thayne's odious manners and then Chloe's stubborn streak. Chloe, meantime, sat on the edge of the bed with her hands folded neatly in her lap, simply shaking her head whenever Beatrice accused her of knowing more than she would say.

Beatrice ranted for a few more minutes before Chloe, obviously losing patience, jumped to her feet. "I see no reason to discuss this subject further, Bea," she said. "I am going to lie down awhile." She kicked off her shoes, dropped down on the bed and turned her back toward Beatrice. "I'm going to sleep," she muttered and immediately began breathing deeply and slowly.

Beatrice had not lived with Chloe for twenty years without recognizing when the blasted girl was being less than forthright. The problem was, Chloe could be as stubborn as she was beautiful. Beatrice was well aware that no amount of cajoling, haranguing, and pleading on her part would elicit from Chloe an admission that she had noticed anything untoward in Thayne's manner toward her.

Even though she was forced by Chloe's pretense of sleep to stop complaining, Beatrice could not stop herself from fuming. The Marquess of Thayne had been unforgivably rude, first ignoring her, then staring at Chloe as though she were Haymarket Ware—another term Beatrice had picked up from her father. And if she was not sadly mistaken, he had intended to give Chloe the cut direct until Beatrice stepped between them. To top all that off, the odious man had suggested that guests in his home be left standing in the entrance hall while he conducted business with his mother.

What was wrong with him? Had he allowed his high rank and handsome appearance to inflate his opinion of himself to the point where he cared nothing for others' feelings?

Or was he jealous of Chloe? Perhaps he had assumed that he was the only person in the world whose appearance approached perfection and was disgruntled to find that Chloe could also lay claim to that distinction.

In any case, the man was despicable and she, for one, would not pander to his excessively high opinion of his own importance. On the

contrary, she was determined to do everything possible to deflate his grandiose perception of himself.

A small smile lifted the corners of her mouth as she considered ways in which she could disconcert the Marquess of Thayne. She dropped into a chair and began to gnaw on the side of her forefinger, a long-standing habit that connoted she was plotting. There must be a million ways to embarrass a peer of the realm. She had only to put her active imagination to work and—

A soft scratching on the door interrupted her thoughts. She glanced toward the bed and saw that Chloe was already sitting up. “Light sleeper or flagrant faker?” Beatrice asked, curling her lip and glaring at her sister.

Chloe responded to Beatrice’s sarcasm with a serene smile.

Gritting her teeth, Beatrice heaved a heavy sigh and stalked over to open the door. Lady Thayne stood on the other side.

“Hello, my dear,” the marchioness said, smiling. “I wanted to assure myself that you and Chloe have everything you need. Is Chloe resting?”

Chloe was already up and hurrying toward the door. “I was, my lady, but I find I am quite restored now. Won’t you please come in?”

The marchioness accepted Chloe’s invitation, glancing about the room and then nodding when she saw that the spacious chamber was equipped with all she would have wished. “May I sit with you for a moment?” she asked. “Nicholas has just shared some news with me, and I would like to tell you about it.”

“The urgent business he mentioned?” Beatrice asked, her eyes shining with ill-concealed curiosity. Inquisitiveness, after all, had been one of her most bounteous gifts from the gods.

“Yes,” the marchioness replied with a wry smile. She seated herself on one of the small chairs that were scattered about the room and motioned for the girls to join her.

Beatrice and Chloe pulled their chairs close.

“Actually, I would not call Nicholas’ tidings urgent—merely astounding. You girls are too young to remember either my dearest Henry or his sister, but perhaps you have heard me and your mother speak about Henrietta.”

“No,” the twins said simultaneously.

The marchioness’ smile became one of reminiscence. “I was always deeply fond of Henrietta. She and my husband were twins, you see, and much alike. They were also very close, as perhaps only twins can be. You girls would be the best judge of that.”

Beatrice and Chloe exchanged glances while each suppressed a smile. They often speculated on why everyone assumed they were

closer than ordinary sisters despite the fact that they had so little in common. Perhaps the only aspect of their intimacy that was greater than average was their infallible ability to sense when the other was in trouble.

Lady Thayne continued. "Henrietta never married, nor did she wish to. She made her home with Henry and me, and I enjoyed having her with us. She never interfered, preferring to live rather secluded from the rest of the family. When Henry died, she was devastated, but she offered me what support she was capable of giving. A year to the day after Henry's death, she packed her bags and left, explaining that she could no longer deal with the sad memories this house invoked."

"Where did she go?" Chloe asked.

"She moved to a small estate near Brighton and has spent the intervening years there. Her letters are always cheerful and full of news of her numerous cats and of her writing. She fancies herself a poet, you see, but to the best of my knowledge, she has never allowed anyone to read one of her poems, which is probably a blessing."

"Why is that, my lady?" Beatrice asked.

The marchioness' lips twitched. "Because Henrietta's personal interpretation of the English language is sometimes bizarre. For example, soon after Henry's death, she warned me that I should keep a close eye on Nicholas. His coming into the title so young, she said, might well result in his growing up to become either a rake or a pig."

"A pig?" Chloe asked, frowning.

"My reaction exactly, dear. However, after a few seconds of thought, I asked Henrietta if perhaps she did not mean that Nicholas might become a prig, too smug in his behavior and attitudes. She said that was exactly what she meant, but that the word was 'pig' as I would have known had I ever bothered to observe a hog's facial expression after it had just gobbled up a trough of slop."

Although Chloe merely smiled, Beatrice chuckled aloud. Lady Henrietta, she had decided, must possess great insight into human nature. After all, the lady's prognostication about her nephew had been doubly correct. The Marquess of Thayne, in Beatrice's opinion, had grown up to exhibit characteristics of both prigs and swine.

"Lady Henrietta sounds delightful," Beatrice said. "Does she visit here often?"

"Actually, my dear, she has not returned, even for a visit, since the day she left. I feared she would never return. But Nicholas received a letter from her earlier this week stating her intention to come here for an extended visit. She claims that enough time has passed to enable her to enter this house without grieving for Henry. The memories now, she says, will be pleasant rather than painful."

“When does she arrive?” Chloe asked.

“Any day, I assume. She did not specify in her letter. Poor Nicholas hardly knows what to think. He had intended, as you know, to spend the next several weeks at his country seat, but with his aunt arriving to take up residence here again, he feels he must be on hand to welcome her and to offer whatever support she might require in readjusting to town life.”

“How thoughtful of him,” Beatrice muttered softly. She was already looking forward to meeting Lady Henrietta, who had further endeared herself to Beatrice by being the unwitting cause of Thayne’s staying in London for the Season. After all, he must be in town if Beatrice’s plans to make his life miserable were to succeed. The vain Marquess of Thayne, she was determined, would soon learn to his sorrow the penalty for insulting Beatrice Crowell’s sister.

Beatrice was pleased to learn that “Vain Thayne”—as she had mentally nicknamed her host—had left for his club immediately after his interview with his mother. Beatrice needed time to plan, having learned many years before the penalty for behaving impulsively. When she was nine years old and her father had refused to teach her how to shoot, she had taken a dueling pistol from his desk and sneaked outside, determined to teach herself about the construction of firearms. Not realizing the pistol was loaded, she had been as shocked as everyone else when she touched the hair trigger and a resounding explosion had ensued.

Unfortunately, an old peacock had chosen that particular moment to come strutting by—a circumstance that proved fatal for the proud bird. And although no one in the family even pretended to like the estate’s prodigious population of peafowl—a pesky flock Mr. Crowell had inherited along with the manor house—Beatrice’s actions had been unanimously denounced. As punishment, she had been sentenced to endure a stern lecture from her father and a week’s incarceration in the house tatting lace for handkerchiefs. At the end of that week, her father had taken her outside and taught her to shoot.

From then on, Beatrice had taken special care to embark on her schemes only after they were well thought out. Besides, this current project, she realized, would require more deliberation and ingenuity than most because she must find a way to harass Thayne without distressing his mother. After all, Lady Thayne was one of Beatrice’s favorite people, and Beatrice would far rather abandon her desire for revenge on Thayne than risk hurting his mother in the process.

After ascertaining that neither Beatrice nor Chloe felt the need for more rest following their journey, Lady Thayne suggested they join her in the drawing room for tea and a discussion of the activities she had planned for the next few days. The three of them, she explained,

would dine alone on this, the twins' first night in Town. She had declined all invitations for the evening, not only because she had feared the girls might be weary, but also because she felt they should be properly clothed before being exposed to the *ton*. Not, she hastened to add, that their local dressmaker had done less than an excellent job in copying styles from old issues of *Gallery of Fashion*, but "a few things" from the hands of a London *modiste* were *de rigueur*.

They would go shopping early the next day, she announced with an expectant glint in her eyes. The twins' father had provided handsomely for their wardrobes, and the marchioness looked forward to helping her young protégées select some appropriate apparel.

"Shall we go to Bond Street?" Chloe asked, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"Of a certainty. We shall also visit Oxford Street, where one can find shops catering to every need. After we select patterns and fabrics for your gowns, we must also choose shoes, fans, gloves, parasols and bonnets."

"How exciting," Chloe said, her eyes shining. "And I shall write Mama tomorrow evening and describe everything we have purchased. She will be delighted to know that Beatrice and I are having an opportunity to do all of the things she would have done for us had her illness not prevented her."

A sharp twinge of guilt pricked Beatrice's conscience. She had been so busy plotting against Vain Thayne, she had not given a moment's thought either to her mother or to her very kind and generous hostess. Determined to correct her oversights, she jumped to her feet and bent to place a fond kiss on Lady Thayne's cheek. "And I shall write Mama too," she announced. "Having twin daughters should entitle her to receiving twin letters."

After dinner the following evening, Beatrice and Chloe adjourned to the library and dutifully took pens in hand to describe for their mother their purchases of the day. Chloe began writing immediately and soon filled two pages with her tiny and neat letters. Beatrice sat drumming her fingers upon a blank sheet.

"Why aren't you writing, Bea?" Chloe demanded, looking up from her letter. "I have already told Mother about the fabric and patterns for my new morning dress, carriage dress, both ball gowns and my riding habit. Now I am describing my shoes and bonnets. You have just as much to tell her as I, so begin writing."

Beatrice obediently dipped her pen into the ink and wrote "Dearest Mama". The problem was, she did not know what else to say. If, like Chloe, she tried to describe her fabrics and patterns, Mama

would surely fear she had lost her taste, if not her senses. Mama had always insisted that green was Beatrice's best color, but Madame Michelle had proclaimed that Beatrice would show to advantage in pale yellows and violets and soft whites with dainty prints upon them. When Beatrice tried to object, the *modiste* had emphatically exhorted her own opinion.

"Just wait, my *petite* miss," she had said in a heavy, if suspect, French accent. "You will see zat I am right. You have inspired me as your lovely sister could never do. She is one who would look beautiful in—how do you say?—sackcloth. You are a challenge, but I accept zat challenge. You will be *très belle* when I have finished with you."

There was no way, Beatrice decided, to explain Madame Michelle to Mama. In the end, she scribbled,

I too have purchased some new gowns, along with shoes, gloves, et cetera. I miss you and Papa very much. Your loving daughter, Bea.

"Honestly Bea! Five lines? For shame. Could you not have shared more of your news with Mama?"

Suppressing her guilt, Beatrice squared her shoulders and glared down her nose at her sister. "You must hold me excused, Chloe. I am not the twin who was gifted with both genius and a knack for writing." She then swept out of the chamber, hurried to the drawing room to say goodnight to her godmother, and retired for the evening, determined to spend the rest of the night, if necessary, concocting a suitable plot against the Marquess of Thayne.

While Beatrice lay staring into the bed-hangings above her head, racking her brain for ways to wreak vengeance upon the Marquess of Thayne, the subject of her thoughts sat sprawled in a shabby chair in a dilapidated boarding house in one of the more unsavory sections of London.

"It's a devil of a coil, Richard," Thayne said to the young man lounging on a sofa across the room. "You will have to admit that." Receiving no response to his comment, he grimaced, took a swallow from his glass of brandy and added, "I fear I've alienated both of your sisters."

Richard Crowell shrugged, then casually pulled a bit of stuffing from a recent rip in the sofa's sagging seat. He gazed with dark and narrowed eyes at the piece of gray fluff for several seconds before dropping it behind the sofa. "Small wonder I can't keep the lint brushed off my jacket," he commented.

"I shouldn't worry about that overmuch." Thayne eyed his companion with raised eyebrows. "Your clothes always look as though they've been slept in anyway."

"They have," Richard said with a grin that transformed his face from bored to boyish. "Destitute rakes can't afford valets, you know." He picked up his brandy and lifted the glass in a silent salute to his guest. "I wouldn't worry overmuch about the twins. You can bring them around soon enough."

"Still, I wish you had told me before tonight that the associate who has been helping you decode those ciphers is your sister."

"Why would I have done that? You know we've been ordered to keep mum whenever possible. We're not even supposed to let Beatrice know that Chloe is helping me, which is awkward for Chloe, but we're both afraid that if Bea knew the whole story, she might proclaim my innocence should she ever hear someone criticize me. She's loyal to a fault, Bea is. Of course I would have told you about Chloe sooner, but I had no idea your mother was planning to bring the girls to London."

"Neither did I. And frankly, I don't know how Randson is going to react when he gets to town and finds them here. Gad, but I wish I could tell him that you were the man your sister was slipping out to meet in Bath."

Richard looked up quickly. "He can't know," he said.

"Damn, Richard, you don't have to tell me that. But I resent any implication that Randson might be less than trustworthy. He almost gave his life for England and would be with Wellington still were it not for that piece of shrapnel lodged in his shoulder."

"No need to defend the Earl of Randson to me. I don't know the man personally, but I've heard enough about his great deeds to realize there's none more patriotic than he. Still, I find it difficult to believe that Randson could misjudge little Chloe so badly. A sweeter girl has never been born."

"I'm relieved to hear you say so. Perhaps she will forgive me for my abominable behavior toward her. The other one, I'm not so sure about. Your twin sisters are not very much alike, are they?"

Richard grinned and shook his head. "No. Chloe is the twin everyone admires, and for good reason. In addition to being beautiful, she is sweet and humble and unbelievably intelligent. She can do more toward decoding those ciphers than any man in the War Office."

"And the other one?"

"Beatrice? To tell you the truth, I have often found her more interesting—and definitely more maddening—than Chloe. Bea is sometimes a confusing contradiction, imminently practical one moment and unbelievably capricious the next. When she was a child, she was forever getting into scrapes, but she usually managed to get herself out of them again. She'll present more problems for you than Chloe. But Nicholas, you must make your peace with the girls and

keep them in London for as long as possible. I have several messages to translate into code and I expect a new batch of ciphers to be arriving in the next few weeks. Having Chloe nearby will be a tremendous help to me.”

“I suppose I can try,” Thayne replied with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. The last thing he wanted was to spend the next three months trying to propitiate his mother’s goddaughters, especially the brown-haired one with the striking green eyes. There was something quite unnerving about the way the chit had glared at him in his entrance hall. “But if you could go to Bath to enlist Chloe’s help, why can you not visit her at Crowell Manor? I know your family is not supposed to be receiving you, but I should think it would be easier to arrange a meeting with your sister in the country than in Town.”

Richard snorted. “Obviously you have never been to Crowell Manor. Actually, the place would be perfect for clandestine meetings were it not for Little Chilton.”

“Little Chilton?”

“A village located less than a mile from the manor. The villagers appear convinced that God put Crowells on earth to serve as a diversion for them. I swear to you that the citizens of Little Chilton know more about the Crowell family than we know about ourselves. I can’t come within ten miles of the village because someone would recognize me and ten minutes later, everybody in the district would know I’d been creeping around Crowell Manor. So, you see, you must keep Chloe in London for as long as possible.”

“Is Chloe also helping you prepare the fake ciphers that are substituted for the originals before they go on to France?”

“Certainly. You see, while I have a knack for this work, Chloe possesses a truly amazing talent. That’s why I need her so desperately.”

Thayne suppressed a sigh. “Who else knows of her part in this?”

“No one. It’s dangerous enough without my bruiting her identity far and wide. Even now, I break into a sweat at the thoughts of Randson having seen me in Bath. If he had been an enemy who was suspicious of me, little Chloe would have been in great danger.”

“It was wise of you to use a disguise. Randson described you as a fellow with blond hair and a full face.”

Richard grinned while a mischievous twinkle brightened his dark eyes. “And let that be a lesson to you. Never go on an assignation with a lady without first stuffing your cheeks full of muslin rags.”

“Enhances the romance of the occasion, does it?” Thayne asked with a smile.

“Imminently. You’ve no idea how much the ladies love fat-

cheeked men. Makes them think of us as innocent babes. The muslin also induces a very intriguing lisp—quite fashionable, you know.”

“I must remember that,” Thayne said, grinning. “Unfortunately, I must also leave now. I am to meet Lord Jennings at White’s within the hour.”

“Better you than me. Has he snapped at any of your lures?”

“Not yet. Nor has he told me to go jump in the Thames because he loves country better than money. Of course, I’ve not been so blatant as to suggest anything overt, and if he is our man, he would naturally be cautious. I had planned to invite him to spend a month or two at Chiloath with me, hoping that greater familiarity would encourage him to confide in me. Unfortunately, family affairs have forced me to change my plans.”

“Well, keep trying. Those coded messages are coming from someone, and if we didn’t have our own man intercepting them before they reached the French, our soldiers would be in for some really rough going.”

“Never fear. I shall keep associating with Jennings until he proves himself either innocent or guilty. But what of your efforts? You’ve been quite adept in your role as disgruntled ex-military man with a need for money. Have none of the other disillusioned soldiers approached you with an offer?”

“Not yet, but Captain Balcorn has become unusually congenial of late. We’re meeting for cards at Timothy’s later this evening.”

“Moving up in the world, aren’t you, old boy? I wasn’t aware that impoverished rakes could afford such refined gaming hells.”

“I am apparently a born gambler, my friend. You wouldn’t believe the sacks of gold I’ve got stuffed into this old sofa, which may account for the fact that it’s the lumpiest thing in creation. In fact, I’ve won so much money, I’m having difficulty maintaining my façade of being desperately destitute. To account for my supposed lack of funds, I’ve made up so many lies about losing money in St. Giles, my acquaintances will soon be expecting the inhabitants of that little hellhole to begin dressing in gold cloth.”

Grinning, Thayne set his empty glass on a cluttered table beside his chair and stood. “I wish I had time to ease your burden by fleecing you out of a few sacks of that gold. But if I’m to meet Jennings, I must leave now. Take care of yourself, Richard.”

The younger man also stood and stepped forward to grasp Thayne’s hand. “Don’t worry about me. Your concerns should be centered around your own upcoming challenge. I do not hesitate to tell you, my friend, that if you have alienated Beatrice, your need to watch your back is greater than mine.”

The Marquess of Thayne shot his associate a quizzical glance and then grinned. “Ever the joker, aren’t you, Richard? But don’t expect me to quake at your ominous warnings. After all, how much trouble could one young woman cause?”

Chapter Four

Strolling through the near-deserted streets toward his town house during the early hours of the following morning, the Marquess of Thayne reflected with little pleasure on the evening he had just spent. Pretending to enjoy Jennings' company was becoming tedious and—Thayne was beginning to fear—a waste of time. If Jennings was involved in the transmission of English secrets via ciphered messages, he was apparently far too astute to entrust that knowledge to anyone else.

Damn, but he was growing tired of this business. But no sooner had that thought crossed his mind than he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. He was giving up only an evening now and again. Richard Crowell had already sacrificed a promising army career, along with his reputation and most of the comforts of life. Only Richard's parents and one of his sisters were aware of what he was doing, and whether he would ever regain his reputation among his former friends and acquaintances remained to be seen.

In the meantime, Nicholas was determined to do all in his power to help Richard, even if this involved the unpleasant task of winning over his twin sisters and keeping them in London for the Season and possibly even beyond. He just regretted having gotten off to such an unpromising start with the two young ladies.

He was not ordinarily so brusque with anyone, let alone guests of his mother's, but then he had hardly expected to walk into his entrance hall and find there the girl who had broken his best friend's heart.

He and Randson had been close since childhood, having grown up on adjoining estates. Like Thayne, Randson had come into his title when he was little more than a boy, but unlike Thayne, Randson had refused to take his responsibilities too seriously, pointing out quite correctly that both young men had trustees who were perfectly capable of handling the estates until they reached their majority. "Relax, my friend," the young Randson had said. "Time enough to fret ourselves to flinders when we don't have somebody else to do it for us."

Thayne had not stopped worrying altogether, but his friend's attitude had eventually convinced him that the weight of the world had not fallen upon his shoulders at his father's death. Thayne had known, even then, that he could never be as tranquil or as carefree as

Randson, but Randson's friendship had gone a long way toward allowing him to enjoy his youth.

In recent years, Randson's social activities had been curtailed by his mother's ill health, a condition she appeared both to enjoy and to nurture. Even now, Randson was staying in the country with his mother until her usual companion, a distant cousin, returned from attending to a greater demand upon her nursing skills—the lying-in of one of her sisters.

Knowing Randson was confined to his estate for a few weeks had encouraged Thayne to plan his ill-fated stay at Chiloath, but when Aunt Henrietta's letter arrived telling him she was returning to London, he had felt he had little choice but to be there to meet her.

Since the Randson estate lay between Chiloath and London, Thayne had naturally stopped off to tell Randson about the change in his plans. He had been shocked to discover how much his friend still grieved over Chloe Crowell. Gone was the cheerful, carefree and sanguine attitude that had always typified Randson. In its place were despair and anguish. Having learned that the woman he wanted to marry was possessed of everything admirable except decency had badly cut up Randson's peace. He moped about the house, losing weight and—according to an aside from the butler as Thayne was leaving—drinking much too heavily.

Thayne had silently cursed Chloe Crowell all the way back to London, only to find her standing in his entrance hall, looking every bit the angel Randson had once believed her to be. Although Thayne did not usually allow his opinion of another, no matter how distasteful, to show in his expression, in this case he had made no effort to hide his disgust. That Chloe had recognized his contempt for her had been evident in the quick flush that had stained her cheeks before she could duck her head.

Then, he had been delighted to see that he had disconcerted her. Now he must try to undo what he had done.

If only he could explain to Chloe that Randson had seen her slip out to meet her brother in Bath and had drawn an erroneous conclusion. But having given Randson his word not to speak of that night, he could not confide in Chloe.

Nor could he explain to Randson that Chloe had been helping her brother encode and decipher messages for the War Office. Again, that was not his secret to share.

“Damnation,” Thayne muttered to himself. He was tired and his head ached from his futile efforts to think of a way to untangle his friend's and Chloe's knotty affair. “It's a devil of a coil,” he said for the second time that evening, this time to himself as he mounted the steps

to his front door.

Beatrice awoke the next morning to an aching head, waning anger and a resurgence of her practical nature. Having lain awake for most of the night trying to formulate plots to pester the Marquess of Thayne, she now realized that her ambitions were well beyond her grasp. After all, she barely knew the man. How could she expect to know what would irritate him and what would not?

Beatrice was forced to admit that her sleepless hours of scheming had been wasted. The only thing she had gained from her night of plotting was the realization that while advanced planning might be an admirable goal, some knowledge of the enemy and his turf was required before one could successfully devise a battle plan. In the case of the Marquess of Thayne, Beatrice feared, she was just going to have to play it by ear.

Wincing as a stray beam of sunlight penetrated the curtains and launched itself directly into her face, Beatrice sat up with a gasp and then moaned when an intensified pounding in her temples protested her precipitous movement. Perhaps a cup of tea would ease her head, she decided, groggily looking about her. She was alone. Chloe, obviously, had already gone down to breakfast. Sometimes Beatrice wished she were not such a sound sleeper. Chloe usually rose before her and often had finished eating before Beatrice even woke up. Oh well, she would just have to ring for her maid and hope some food would still be available when she went down to breakfast.

Forty-five minutes later, Beatrice glanced into the breakfast parlor and was delighted to find her sister and godmother still sitting over their cups of tea. She was less pleased to discover Vain Thayne with them and to see Chloe smiling in apparent enjoyment at some remark he had just made.

"There you are, sleepyhead," Lady Thayne said, standing and smiling fondly when she spied Beatrice hesitating in the doorway. "Come in, dear, and join us. I'll ring for some fresh tea. We're all rather indolent this morning, I fear. However, Nicholas was just telling Chloe he would be pleased to escort both of you for a morning ride in the park tomorrow."

Beatrice pulled a deep breath into her lungs and stalked into the room, pausing beside Vain Thayne's chair with the intention of delivering a cutting rejection of his offer. When he looked up at her, his eyes sparkling like blue glass and his lips curving into a charming smile, the words died on Beatrice's tongue.

"I understand you are a talented equestrian, Miss Crowell," Thayne said. "I would consider it an honor to accompany you for a

ride tomorrow morning.”

“Why, err, t-t-thank you,” Beatrice stammered, feeling the fool.

“That’s settled then. Tomorrow morning at nine, shall we say?”

Beatrice did not try to speak again. She merely inclined her head while silently cursing her heart for acting so irresponsibly. There was no reason for the silly thing to accelerate so drastically just because a man she could not like had smiled at her, even though he might well be the most handsome man in the world.

“Would you care for some breakfast, Bea?” Lady Thayne asked, obviously unaware that Beatrice’s appetite had bolted along with her ability to think rationally.

“Just tea, thank you,” Beatrice managed to croak, ignoring Chloe’s sharp glance of disbelief. Chloe, of course, knew that Beatrice was in the habit of consuming more breakfast than most farm laborers could say grace over.

Beatrice sipped tea while allowing the conversation to flow around her in hopes that her brain would soon begin functioning again. She was just about to request a second cup when the butler appeared in the door of the breakfast parlor. The expression on his usually impassive face suggested nothing less than stupefaction.

Thayne frowned. “What is it, Wallace? Is something amiss?”

“You have a guest, my lord. I have placed the lady in the drawing room.”

“Very well, Wallace. However, admitting a guest to my home does not usually unnerve you. What is different this time?”

Wallace flushed and then coughed. “What it is, my lord, is that I don’t know what to do with the lady’s fifteen cats.”

“Fifteen cats?” Thayne jumped to his feet so violently that his chair skidded backward and tipped over with a resounding clatter.

Chloe gasped and Beatrice grinned. She suddenly felt much better.

“It is Henrietta,” Lady Thayne declared. “It must be.”

“But fifteen cats?” Thayne stared at the butler as though hoping the man would recant his words.

“Yes, my lord. Or so the lady said.”

“Where are they now?”

“In the baggage carriage, I believe.”

“Well, leave them there for the moment. I shall have to speak to Aunt Henrietta and reach some decision about where to house them. Mother, will you join me to greet our guest?”

“Certainly, my dear. Come, Bea and Chloe. You too will wish to meet Henrietta.”

Beatrice could think of nothing she would rather do at the

moment. In fact, she was already feeling a strong sense of kinship with Lady Henrietta. Surely someone who would go visiting with fifteen cats must possess an intriguing personality.

Thayne was already striding from the room, his mother close behind. Beatrice jumped up and hurried after them, leaving Chloe to follow or not as she chose.

When Beatrice entered the drawing room, hard on the heels of Thayne and his mother, her gaze flew to the formidably framed woman who was standing in front of the fireplace and gazing up at the portrait of her late brother. When Lady Henrietta turned around, Beatrice could not suppress a gasp.

Had the late marquess returned to life in female form, he would not have looked more like the woman who stood beneath his portrait. Unfortunately for Lady Henrietta, the features that had contributed to her brother being considered a handsome man did not compliment her. The high forehead, generous nose, square chin and broad mouth endowed the lady with an aspect that would have encouraged a marauding Viking to stop and think carefully before approaching her. Beatrice possessed no such apprehensions. She immediately smiled a friendly greeting while waiting eagerly for Lady Henrietta to speak.

“Ah, Sophia, Nicholas. You are here. Good to see you both. Come, Nicholas. You may kiss me.”

Beatrice bit her lip to keep from giggling aloud while the arrogant and elegant Marquess of Thayne obediently walked to his aunt’s side and bent to touch his lips to her proffered cheek.

“There,” Lady Henrietta said with an audible sigh after Thayne had bestowed the brief kiss. Her tone intimated that at least one disagreeable chore was behind her. “Come, Sophia, I shall give you a hug.”

The marchioness hurried to throw her arms around her sister-in-law, holding her in a fond embrace for several seconds. “Welcome home, Henrietta,” she said softly. Then she turned to Beatrice and Chloe. “Come, girls. I wish to make you known to my dear sister-in-law. Henrietta, these young ladies are Chloe and Beatrice Crowell, Catherine’s daughters.”

Beatrice sank into a curtsy. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Lady Henrietta,” she said.

Chloe too curtsied while murmuring a greeting.

“Catherine’s daughters, eh? Well, I must say the blonde one looks just like her. I always liked your mother, young ladies. I hope you are a credit to her.”

“I hope so too my lady,” Chloe said.

“Call me Henrietta if you wish. I’ve never believed in formality,

especially toward those of us who are in the arts. Sophia, I would like a cup of tea.”

“I’ll ring for some immediately.” Lady Thayne hurried to the corner of the room where she pulled upon a tasseled cord.

“Aunt Henrietta?”

“Yes, Nicholas?”

“I need to ask you about your cats.”

“Has your butler not done something with them already? I told him to.”

“Wallace wasn’t quite sure what your wishes would be.”

“Har! Pollard would have known what to do. Where is he anyway? I was none too happy to find a new butler greeting me.”

“Pollard retired eight years ago. I have been well pleased with Wallace.”

“Don’t see why, if he can’t figure out what to do with a few cats.”

“The thing is, neither of us knows what your preferences are. Do you want them housed in your suite of rooms?”

“No, can’t say that I do. I didn’t keep them in my house near Brighton because they can be destructive little things, always clawing the furniture. Have them put in the stables. I can visit them there every day without having my chair seats shredded to pieces.”

“As you wish,” Thayne responded. “I’ll inform Wallace.” He turned with a soft sigh of relief and hurried toward the hallway.

In less than ten minutes, the marchioness was presiding over tea while her family and guests made polite conversation.

“I say, Sophia, ‘tis nice of you to take Catherine’s girls in and give them a Season. The blonde here—Chloe, is it?—was just telling me about her mother’s health problems. A shame. I always liked Catherine.”

“I’m thrilled that Catherine has entrusted her daughters to me,” Lady Thayne said. “We shall be going out for the first time tonight to a small reception at Louisa Burton’s. Will you join us?”

“At Louisa Burton’s? I should say not. I’ve never liked Louisa Burton. Always thought of her as a judgmental hypocrite—the kind of woman who would strain at a gnat and swallow a candle.”

Thayne, who had been gazing rather distractedly into his tea, looked up quickly. “I believe that’s a *camel*, Aunt,” he said.

“Where?” Henrietta asked, quickly twisting her head to look about the room as though expecting to find a dromedary lurking in a corner or attempting to hide behind one of the settees.

Beatrice clapped her hand over her mouth and pretended to be clearing her throat while she stifled a giggle. Chloe, she noticed, was

staring wide-eyed at Henrietta, apparently unsure of what to make of the lady.

“Your quotation,” Thayne explained. “It should be ‘strain at a gnat and swallow a *camel*’.”

“A camel? That’s ridiculous. Obviously it is *candle*. Nothing else makes sense. I ask you, nephew, are camels native to England?”

“No, ma’am,” Thayne admitted. “However, your quotation is from the Bible and in that part of the world—”

“Yes,” his aunt interrupted, “but my quotation is from the *King James* version of the Bible. I suppose next you will try to convince me that King James was not English.”

“No, ma’am, but—”

“Very well, then. I think I have made my point. Sophia, I would like to rest for a while now.”

“Certainly, my dear.” Lady Thayne stood. “I’ll see you to your chamber.”

“No need for that. I assume you’ve placed me in my old rooms.”

“Of course.”

“Then I can find my own way, thank you.” Henrietta, her square chin held high, swept from the room.

“Oh dear, Nicholas, I fear you’ve offended your aunt,” Lady Thayne said, dropping back into her chair.

“Yes, it was foolish of me to correct her quotation. Regrettably, I didn’t think before I spoke.”

“It is my fault, really. I should have warned you to ignore anything Henrietta says that appears to be a slip of the tongue. She always knows exactly what she is saying and is always positive that what she says is correct. Any attempt to modify her speech infuriates her. I suggest we all ignore any misquotations in the future.”

“Certainly, my lady,” Beatrice agreed quickly.

“I won’t make that mistake again,” Thayne promised, his tone and rueful grin leaving no doubt as to his sincerity.

Chloe looked down at her hands, which were clasped tightly in her lap. “I shall try,” she murmured, her hesitation resulting in surprised glances from her host and hostess.

“Chloe is an avid reader and cannot stand to hear one of her favorite authors misquoted,” Beatrice explained. “It grates on her nerves terribly.”

“Yes,” Chloe agreed, “but I must simply constrain myself if I hear Lady Henrietta misquoting someone.”

“I think that would be best, dearest,” Lady Thayne said. “Now we must decide what to wear to Louisa’s reception tonight. Nicholas, do

you wish to accompany us?"

"Unfortunately, I have a prior engagement. Otherwise, I would never pass up the opportunity to spend an evening with three of the most beautiful women in England."

"Prettily said," Lady Thayne responded with a pleased smile. "We shall be delighted to accept your escort on a future occasion. Now girls, let us go to your chamber and choose your gowns. Then I think we should go shopping again. Nicholas, we shall see you later."

Although Beatrice spent the remainder of her day acceding to her godmother's plans, her mind was not on their preparations for the upcoming evening. She was too busy trying to figure out just what she really thought of the Marquess of Thayne. He had certainly been pleasant to her and Chloe that morning. Could she have misjudged him, or perhaps even misread his intentions when she believed he was about to give Chloe the cut direct? Perhaps he had merely been tired from his journey and disconcerted by news of his aunt's upcoming visit. Perhaps he sincerely regretted his apparent rudeness and was trying to make amends. If so, Beatrice decided, she would gladly abandon her plans for revenge. After all, she did not perceive herself to be a vindictive person.

On the other hand, she had always placed great faith in first impressions. Almost invariably—with only a couple of unfortunate misjudgments—her first perceptions of people had been proven in time to be accurate.

After another hour of vacillation, Beatrice concluded that it was simply too soon to make a final decision about Vain Thayne. In the meantime, she could not help wishing that he did not have such an unusual effect on her. Never before had a gentleman's presence caused her to lose her appetite and her ability to think clearly. But she would simply have to overcome such missish failings should she at some point in the future determine that the Marquess of Thayne was really deserving of her malice.

Chapter Five

“Time to get up, Bea,” Chloe called the following morning.

Beatrice moaned and opened her eyes. Chloe was already up and partially dressed. Her riding habit was spread carefully upon a nearby settee.

“I don’t know anyone named Bea,” Beatrice muttered, pulling the covers up around her ears. Perhaps if she pretended to be ill, she could renege on her commitment to go riding with the marquess. After all, the idea of spending the next hour with a man whose very presence created peculiar sensations in her chest and stomach was enough, Beatrice decided, to justify a claim of sickness.

“Get up, Bea,” Chloe repeated. “Your new riding habit arrived this morning. I cannot wait to see if you look as charming in it as Madame Michelle said you would.”

Suddenly wide awake, Beatrice flung off the covers and jumped out of bed. The riding habit, freshly pressed, was already hanging in her wardrobe. With a gasp of pleasure, Beatrice dashed over to examine the soft golden velvet trimmed in dark brown braid. “Oh Chloe, is it not exquisite?”

“It certainly is. Now hurry and drink your chocolate, Bea. We must be ready on time. You know how irritated men become if the horses are kept standing.”

Beatrice needed no further urging. It had been several days since she’d been on a horse, and with her new habit to boost her confidence, she was willing to endure even Vain Thayne’s disconcerting company in order to go riding.

At five minutes before nine, Beatrice, feeling unusually attractive in her new habit, and Chloe, looking beautiful in her blue, hurried down the front steps to the street where Thayne waited with their horses. As soon as Beatrice saw her mount, her opinion of Thayne rose considerably. His confidence in her riding ability was evident. While he had selected a prettily behaved mare for Chloe, for Beatrice he had provided a frisky gelding with just enough spirit to make riding him an adventure.

“My, what a handsome fellow,” Beatrice exclaimed, then blushed when she realized her eyes had been resting upon her host rather than her horse. While it was impossible to avoid noting how Thayne’s well-cut riding coat emphasized the breadth of his shoulders, Beatrice found her attention claimed by his expressive face. His lips were

curved into a charming smile and his eyes sparkled like the brook behind Crowell Manor when the sun was especially bright.

Thayne appeared not to notice Beatrice's flushed face, instead smiling his pleasure at her enthusiastic words. "I am glad you approve of Dante," he said.

"Oh how extremely appropriate," Chloe exclaimed, clapping her hands with delight.

Thayne turned to Chloe with a questioning expression on his face.

Beatrice also turned to stare at her sister. "What do you mean?" she asked. "What is appropriate?"

"Don't you see?" Chloe demanded, a smile of pleasure brightening her face. "Dante and Beatrice. Surely you recall. Dante, the Italian poet, loved Beatrice so much that even though she died before they could marry, he immortalized her in *The Divine Comedy* by casting her as a symbol of divine revelation who guided him through Paradise."

Thayne continued to stare at Chloe, a stunned expression on his face.

Beatrice, more accustomed to her sister's predilection for creating everyday analogies to ancient writings, was confounded for only a second. Then she burst into laughter. "Really, Chloe! Me? A symbol of divine revelation? How *inappropriate*, I would say. But I do hope Dante allows me to guide him through the park, even though he certainly cannot depend upon my guiding him through Paradise."

Heaving a heavy sigh, Chloe glared at her sister. "Really, Bea! Sometimes I despair of your ever developing an interest in great literature."

"I would hope so, dearest," Beatrice replied with a grin. She turned to Thayne, her eyes twinkling. "How clever of you to choose a horse for me whose name is linked with mine in literature. I cannot but wonder what other literary surprises are in store for us this morning. What is the name of Chloe's mount, my lord?"

Thayne's answering grin was rather rueful. "Nothing even remotely literary, I fear. "Her name is Rose."

"A rose by any other name—" Beatrice began, only to be interrupted by a sharp tap on the arm.

"Behave yourself, Bea," Chloe commanded. "Lord Thayne will think we are totally without manners." With pink cheeks, she turned to the groom and accepted his assistance in mounting.

Thayne had, in fact, been thinking that both of the Crowell twins were a bit out of the ordinary. He had also been envisioning Chloe as a prospective bride for Randson and found that he liked the idea very much. Knowing Randson as he did, Thayne was sure that, despite the

apparent differences between his best friend and this lovely girl, Chloe would be good for Randson and he for her. Chloe could provide the settling effect that Randson so frequently needed, while Randson would delight in the fact that his wife shared his love for literature.

There must be some way, Thayne reflected after helping Beatrice into the saddle and mounting his own stallion, to convince Randson that he had been mistaken in what he saw that evening in Bath when his faith in Chloe had been shattered.

But further consideration of Randson's problems must wait for another time, Thayne reminded himself. After all, he had invited Richard Crowell's sisters to go riding with him because he must try to ensure that the girls remain in Town for as long as possible. To that end, he was determined to devote his full attention, complete with his most charming manners, to his riding companions that morning.

He was pleased to find that the park was not especially crowded. The less time he was required to spend chatting with acquaintances, he reflected, the more attention he could devote to his assignment of placating the twins—a task that was promising to be less arduous than he had once feared. Chloe's manner toward him suggested she had already forgiven him for his initial rudeness. He was less sure about Beatrice. He sometimes fancied he detected a speculative expression in her narrowed eyes when her gaze rested on him. It would probably be wise, he decided, to devote most of his charm to her this morning.

"I must commend you on your handling of Dante, Miss Crowell," Thayne said, drawing his own mount up beside Beatrice. "He is a bit frisky, I fear."

Beatrice, who had been laughing at her mount's occasional antics, met Thayne's gaze, her eyes sparkling with pleasure. "But quite charming, I assure you, my lord. I like a horse with spirit."

"Are you also finding life in Town to your liking?" he asked, flashing his most charming smile.

"Anyone must admire London, my lord," she replied after a brief hesitation. "The diversity of this city is quite amazing."

Aware that his question had been gently sidestepped, Thayne clenched his teeth and continued to smile, although not without some effort. Something about Beatrice Crowell disturbed him, and he was having a bit of trouble deciding exactly what. That she seemed impervious to his charm was only part of the problem, he assured himself. After all, he was not so conceited as to think that every woman must fall at his feet if he beckoned—although most had. No, it was more than her seeming lack of interest that bothered him, but he could not pin it down. Frustrated, he slowed his mount and dropped back beside Chloe.

The Marchioness of Thayne was pleased with herself. Beatrice and Chloe had been her guests for only two weeks and she had already introduced them to everyone who might be considered influential in the *ton*. She had taken them with her to routs, Venetian breakfasts, musicales and on morning calls, where they had behaved as she had known they would—with becoming modesty and charming amiableness. The marchioness was not surprised that both girls showed signs of becoming popular. On the other hand, she was amazed at the attention her son had been devoting to them.

Perhaps, Lady Thayne decided, Nicholas was merely trying to atone for his rudeness on the day the twins arrived in Town, but if that was the only reason he had been accompanying her and the girls to even the most boring of engagements, he had long since paid that particular debt.

Of course, she did not intend to share this opinion with Nicholas and risk his withdrawing his support of the twins. She was well aware that her son's making the girls an object of his gallantry could only add to their consequence.

Still, while she delighted in Nicholas' continuing escort, she could not stop speculating about his motives. Only a few weeks earlier, he had departed for the country after declaring himself tired of the social whirl. Yet, just this morning he had professed himself not only willing but eager to accompany his mother and her guests to the first ball of the Season.

"Do you go to the Duchess of Millnor's ball with us tonight, Henrietta?" the marchioness asked that afternoon while the ladies of the household were taking tea.

"Har!" Henrietta snorted. "I should think not. Never could stand a crush, and it's bound to be one. I shall devote the evening to my writing and to the Bard, my dearest Will."

Beatrice, with a macaroon halfway to her mouth, paused to glance at Chloe. Her poor sister, Beatrice realized, had endured much over the past two weeks. Henrietta invariably spoke of Shakespeare as though he were her closest friend, referring to the writer as "my dearest Will" and frequently quoting his words. Or more likely, Beatrice suspected, *misquoting* his words, judging by the way Chloe so often gripped her lower lip between her teeth.

"Is your writing going well?" Lady Thayne asked Henrietta with a polite smile.

Henrietta sighed and shook her head, a martyred expression on her broad face. "No one, I am convinced, could appreciate my work were I to share it with them. As my dearest Will once said, 'A prophet

is without honour in his own country'."

Beatrice was not surprised to detect a muffled gasp from Chloe's direction. Even *she* was aware that Henrietta's quotation came from the Bible, and Beatrice feared the temptation to correct Henrietta was about to become too great for Chloe to resist. Feeling a diversion was desirable, Beatrice pretended to strangle on her tea, coughing and sputtering for a full minute. By the time she had suffered three hearty slaps on the back from Henrietta, she wished she had been less resourceful.

"I am fine now, Lady Henrietta," Beatrice breathlessly assured her would-be savior. "Thank you."

"Thank me no thankings, nor proud me no prouds," Henrietta quoted with a smug smile. "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*."

"*Romeo and Juliet*," Chloe muttered softly.

"What?" Henrietta demanded, whirling to glare at Chloe.

Chloe looked up into Henrietta's snapping eyes, gulped and improvised rapidly. "I said, 'Oh-me-oh, and you'll just have to excuse me now'. You see, I find I am extremely weary and feel I should get some rest."

"An excellent idea," agreed the marchioness, who appeared on the verge of losing a battle to subdue her twitching lips. "We should all lie down for two or three hours so we will be fresh for the ball tonight. You girls may be excused now."

As Beatrice and Chloe hurried from the room, Beatrice whispered in a strangled tone, "'Oh-me-oh'? Really, Chloe!"

Beatrice had often wondered why so many of her sex became ecstatic at the prospect of attending a ball. This night she began to understand. Betty, the maid who had served her and Chloe at Crowell Manor for many years and who had accompanied them to London, had glowed with pride while helping Beatrice into one of her new ball gowns—a pale lilac muslin embroidered with tiny violets and tied beneath the high waist with purple ribbons. Betty also dressed Beatrice's hair in a new style, piling the heavy tresses on top of her head except for a few long curls that were left hanging down to brush her bare shoulders. When Betty finished, Beatrice gazed at her reflection in the mirror and felt her heart begin to race. Surely tonight even the Marquess of Thayne would find something about her appearance to admire.

Beatrice had been reluctant to admit even to herself the extent to which her feelings for Thayne had fluctuated since the day she and Chloe had arrived in London. During that first memorable meeting, she had been both overwhelmed by the magnitude of the man's

physical presence and infuriated by his seeming conceit. Since that time, she had grown to appreciate his slow smile, his quickness to recognize the absurd, and his kindness toward her and Chloe.

But Beatrice sometimes fancied that beneath all Thayne's thoughtful attentions, she could detect a hint of a covert motive, although she could not imagine what that motive might be. She was determined, however, that should she ever learn that Thayne was trying to use her or Chloe for his own purposes, she would quickly resurrect her plans to disrupt his life. A slightly sinister smile tugged at the corners of Beatrice's lips just before a soft scratching on the door interrupted her thoughts.

The marchioness, resplendent in aqua satin, hurried into the room. After subjecting both twins to a kindly inspection, she nodded her head approvingly. "Chloe, my dear, you are ravishing in your white," she said, her smile one of simple pride. "And you, my darling Bea, are something quite out of the ordinary. Madame Michelle has outdone herself. I predict that by midnight, each of you will have at least a dozen men professing undying love for you. Stop laughing, Bea. You will see that I am not exaggerating. Now if you are ready, let us go. I can hardly wait to see Matilda Massinghill's face. She has always thought no one could surpass her Amelia's beauty. Well, we shall prove her wrong tonight."

After exchanging amused glances, Beatrice and Chloe hurried to pull on their gloves, drape their shawls around their shoulders and follow their godmother down the hallway.

Thayne stood at the bottom of the stairs and watched with obvious approval as his mother and the twins descended. His quick smile brought the blood rushing to Beatrice's face, and she could not help hoping that at least some of the admiration she detected in his eyes was directed toward her.

"Ah, but I am the luckiest fellow in creation," Thayne announced, bowing deeply. "No one, I am convinced, could lay claim to the company of three more beautiful ladies tonight."

"Flatterer," his mother said in a scolding tone, but the pleased smile on her face removed any sting from the word. "However, I must admit that your compliments are accurate in describing my goddaughters. Omit *me* from your blandishments and we shall have no quarrel."

Thayne instantly reached for his mother's hand and, with twinkling eyes, bowed deeply. "I hesitate to contradict you, ma'am, but I fear that in this instance, the surest way to incur your wrath would be to obey your command."

Laughing, the marchioness admitted that she would not be best

pleased if her son referred to the company as “two beautiful ladies and—of course—my mother.”

The general laughter masked the fact that someone had knocked upon the door, although Wallace had obviously heard, for he hurried forward to open it. The Earl of Randson stepped into the entry hall, his own face brightened by a smile until his gaze fell on Chloe's face. The change in his expression could not have been greater had someone just slapped him with a week-old fish.

Several seconds of awkward silence greeted the earl's unanticipated arrival. The marchioness was the first to find her tongue. “My dear Lord Randson! What a delightful surprise. Do come in. I believe you have met my guests, Chloe and Beatrice Crowell.”

Beatrice glanced at Chloe, whose face had grown almost as white as the Earl of Randson's. That gentleman, she noted, was every bit as rigid as the suit of armor lurking in the corner to his left. His hands were balled into tight fists at his sides. With obvious effort, he unclenched his hands and bowed stiffly. “I have had the honor of meeting the Misses Crowell,” he said, his voice strained. “A delight to see you both again.”

He turned quickly to Thayne. “I see you were about to go out. Bad timing on my part. I must apologize. I shall see you later.”

“Lord Randson, dear, don't go yet,” the marchioness interjected quickly. But the earl had already turned and was hurrying down the steps toward the street.

“Take the carriage and go to the ball without me, Mother,” Thayne called over his shoulder as he dashed for the front door. “I shall see you there later. I must catch up to Randson now.”

The three ladies were left standing alone in the entry hall. Wallace remained by the door, appearing unsure whether he should close it behind Thayne or leave it open for the ladies.

The marchioness sighed and then glanced sharply at Chloe. “Do you feel like attending the ball, my dear?” she asked, concern clear in her tone.

Chloe squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “Of course, my lady. Why would I not?”

“No reason, of course,” the marchioness murmured. “Silly of me. Let us go then.”

The carriage ride to the Duchess of Millnor's town house was unusually subdued. Chloe sat stiffly, the only sign of her distress an occasional deep sigh. The marchioness at first tried to engage both girls in conversation, but when neither responded, she soon lapsed into a quiet study.

Beatrice was too busy deliberating to talk. Having seen the

Marquess of Thayne and the Earl of Randson together, she had suddenly understood exactly what had transpired the day she and Chloe arrived in Town. In fact, she was feeling more than a bit foolish for not having realized immediately why Thayne had been observing Chloe with contempt that day. Although she still did not know why Randson had taken Chloe in such strong dislike in Bath, it was obvious that he had shared his complaint with Thayne, who in turn had judged Chloe and found her wanting long before he even met her.

And Chloe! Beatrice was sure her sister had immediately comprehended the reason behind Thayne's initial antipathy toward her, despite her claims of noticing nothing strange in Thayne's manner that day. Chloe, of course, being familiar with Beatrice's predilection toward retribution, would have preferred hiding the fact that Thayne had been influenced against her by Lord Randson.

Beatrice could not decide who was most deserving of her fury—Randson for having formed an unfavorable opinion of Chloe, Thayne for having condemned Chloe on the basis of that opinion or Chloe for having failed to confide in her. If Chloe had not pretended she detected nothing wrong in Thayne's manner, Beatrice would not have neglected her plans for retaliation. Now she would have to start all over again, but she had no doubts about her abilities. She would soon repay the vile Marquess of Thayne for his unkindness toward her sister.

Chapter Six

Thayne had to run in order to catch up with the earl, who stalked down the street as though trying to outwalk an unpleasant memory. Catching Randson, however, proved easier than convincing him to stop and listen to reason.

“You were on your way out,” Randson objected when Thayne grasped his arm to keep him from walking on. “Go on back home. You can’t leave the ladies standing in the entry hall all evening.”

“They have gone ahead without me,” Thayne said. He could hear the carriage pulling away from the curb. “Come on, my friend. I have something very important to tell you. Something about Miss Chloe.”

“Miss Chloe?” Randson repeated, his tone suddenly grim. “You had better not say anything detrimental about Miss Chloe or I’ll...I swear I’ll call you out even if you *are* the best shot in England.”

“Call me out? Over Chloe Crowell? But you don’t even like the girl.”

“Not like her? I love her, you nodcock. I’ve been thinking. I must have been mistaken about what I thought I saw that night in Bath. No doubt I’d had a cup too much to drink and started hallucinating. I know now that Miss Chloe would never do what I thought I saw her do.”

Thayne breathed a silent sigh of relief. Perhaps this was not going to be as difficult as he had feared. “I am sure you are right,” he said with a wide and relieved smile. “Miss Chloe appears to be all that is proper and maidenly. I think you should resume your courtship of her immediately.”

“I can’t,” Randson replied, his shoulders drooping.

“Why not?”

“I’m not good enough for her. A cad—that’s me, or anyone else who would believe something so horrible about the purest girl in the world. She deserves better than me.”

“Oh gad,” Thayne muttered to himself. Why had he ever supposed anything to do with Randson would be easy? He reached up to place a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Of course you are not a cad. Anyone could have made the same mistake.”

“How would you know? You weren’t there.”

Thayne took a deep breath. “No, but I’ve talked to the man who was.”

Randson looked up sharply. "You mean I actually did see a man there that night and Miss Chloe really did slip out to meet him?"

"Yes, but—"

"Dash it all, Thayne. Why did you have to tell me that, just when I'd convinced myself that it never happened?"

"Randson," Thayne said through clenched teeth, his patience evaporating rapidly. "Will you please come home with me? It is not quite the thing, you know—us standing here on the street discussing Miss Chloe."

"Gad no," Randson agreed, glancing about as though just becoming aware of their surroundings. "Let's go back to your house. It is closer than mine. Then you can tell me about this man Miss Chloe was meeting in Bath."

"Well, who is he?" Randson demanded as soon as Thayne had closed the library door behind them.

"Let me pour us a glass of brandy before we begin this conversation, Randson. Sit down. We might as well make ourselves comfortable because I fear I shall have a great deal of explaining to do."

Randson obediently selected a seat and then watched glumly while Thayne hurried to the sideboard and poured two generous servings from a decanter. He accepted the glass of brandy and waited until Thayne lowered himself into a nearby overstuffed chair before again demanding, "Who is the fellow?"

"I can't tell you that. However, I have talked with him, and I assure you—word of a gentleman—that Miss Chloe's and his meeting was totally innocent."

"Then why can't you tell me who he is?"

"I can't tell you that either."

"Damn it, Thayne, I'll be dashed if I can understand any of this. You can't tell me who the man is. You can't tell me why you can't tell me who the man is. Can you tell me anything at all?"

"I can swear to you on my honor that there is no romantic attachment between him and Miss Chloe."

"Then why did she run into his arms? Tell me that."

"Because they are very fond of each other."

"Fond? Fond?" Randson glanced down at the brandy in his hand and frowned, as though wondering how it had got there. He lifted the glass and consumed half its contents before continuing. "Looked like a damn sight more than fondness to me."

"Well, it wasn't."

“You mean they don’t love each other?”

Thayne gulped. “I cannot honestly say that they don’t.”

Randson groaned. “Are you trying to drive me crazy? Because if you are, you’re soon going to succeed.”

Thayne was beginning to feel a bit less than sane himself. He leaned forward in his chair, staring into his friend’s eyes. “Please, can you not just take my word on this?”

Randson blew out his breath in a long sigh. “First let me see if I understand what you are saying. Miss Chloe slipped out of her house in the early hours of the morning to meet a man she may or may not love?”

“Well, I’m sure she loves him, but not in any romantic sense of the word.”

Randson slammed his glass onto the table beside his chair and jumped to his feet. “Aha! It was that brother of hers, wasn’t it?”

Thayne blanched. “Dear God, Randson. I never said that.”

“You don’t have to. It’s obvious now. Why didn’t you just tell me straight out that it was Richard Crowell? And how could you know his identity, anyway? Have you talked with him lately? But if you have, that seems strange because I thought he had ruined himself and was now beyond the pale. Ah! I’ll bet that’s just a ruse on his part. It must be a ruse, or you wouldn’t be protecting him.”

Thayne groaned and slumped down into his seat. “Randson, you don’t by chance have a stiletto in your boot, do you?”

“Of course not. I’m not a pirate. What do you want with a stiletto anyway?”

“I think I’m going to cut my throat. Either that or murder you. I can’t decide which.”

Randson was suddenly as cheerful as he had been morose just moments before. “Chin up, Thayne, old boy,” he said, a grin brightening his face. “Obviously I’ve stumbled onto something I shouldn’t have. But don’t worry, because I would never admit to suspecting that you are engaged in some secret work for the government, that Miss Chloe’s brother is helping you or that she is helping him.”

“Now Randson,” Thayne began. He stopped when he realized his friend was ignoring him.

“Extremely bright girl, Miss Chloe,” Randson continued, oblivious to Thayne’s distress. “Don’t know what she ever saw in me. There’s no accounting for taste, is there? I think I’ll go home and change clothes. There’s still time for me to go to the Duchess of Millnor’s ball. Are you coming?”

“Later, maybe,” Thayne muttered. “I seem to have developed a

headache.”

The magic had gone out of Beatrice’s first ball, and she knew that Chloe felt the same. Blast all men, anyway! What was wrong with them that they could not see beyond her sister’s beauty? Chloe was a person, not a goddess to be set on a pedestal and admired until she displayed a human quality and then fell from grace.

The moment they had entered the Duchess of Millnor’s elaborately decorated ballroom, Lady Thayne was surrounded by young men angling for an introduction to Chloe. It soon became obvious that both Chloe and Beatrice would be engaged for every dance. Beatrice would have felt more flattered had not at least half of her partners chosen to quiz her about Chloe while they danced. She was trying to think of some heinous character flaw she could attribute to her sister in hopes of discouraging Chloe’s most objectionable admirers when the Earl of Randson attracted her attention by his belated entrance.

“Speaking of objectionable,” Beatrice muttered to herself. She had never fully understood why Chloe was attracted to Randson. He was nice enough looking, of course, with his thick dark hair, hazel eyes and slow smile. Chloe also insisted that he was one of the most intelligent people she had ever met, and Beatrice didn’t doubt her word, although she personally had never been especially impressed by a man merely because he could quote from every book he had ever read.

“Did you say something?” asked Beatrice’s partner, a lad of about eighteen who had been craning his neck trying to catch a glimpse of Chloe on the crowded dance floor.

“Yes, Mr. Dixon. I fear I am growing a bit faint. I see a vacant chair near the entrance. If you could just take me there and then fetch me a glass of lemonade...” Beatrice sighed, allowing her eyelids and then her shoulders to droop. She had never felt faint in her life and could only hope her feigned symptoms were appropriate.

“But there is a sofa much closer than that chair, Miss Crowell,” her partner objected. “Allow me to seat you there.”

“I want the chair,” Beatrice said through clenched teeth, glaring at Mr. Dixon.

He swallowed loudly. “Yes, ma’am. I mean Miss Crowell. Whatever you say.” He turned quickly toward the ballroom entrance.

A second later, Beatrice tugged her escort to a stop directly in front of the Earl of Randson. Mr. Dixon frowned in obvious confusion. “Do you not wish to sit down after all, Miss Crowell?”

“In a moment,” Beatrice replied shortly. “I believe you were going to fetch me some lemonade.”

“Eh, yes. Sorry. I shall return shortly.” Mr. Dixon turned and fled, appearing delighted to run an errand that freed him from Beatrice’s company for a few minutes.

“How gratifying to see you again this evening, Lord Randson,” Beatrice said with an insincere smile. She was determined to bring to his attention the fact that the girl he had so unkindly cut in Bath was now the toast of London.

Randson glanced at Beatrice and raised his eyebrows, as though pleasantries from Chloe’s sister were the last thing he would have expected. “Miss Crowell,” he said, bowing. “How charming you look this evening.”

Beatrice batted her eyelashes. “Why, thank you, my lord. Of course, I cannot hold a candle to my sister. Chloe has been surrounded from the moment we entered the room. The Duke of Everston insisted upon leading her out for the first set, and the Marquess of Centrary would not give the poor girl a moment’s peace until she agreed to allow him to take her into supper.”

“How, ah, trying. For your sister, I mean.” Randson pretended to yawn, obviously hoping to convince Beatrice that he was bored, but she noted with delight that his face had grown pale.

She smiled broadly. “Yes, I daresay she will have a dozen offers before the week is out. Poor Chloe. I do not know how the dear child will choose among them.”

“A dilemma. No doubt about that,” Randson agreed, narrowing his eyes to scan the ballroom as though searching for someone. “Have you seen Miss Amelia Massinghill? I was told she would be here this evening.”

“No, I have not,” Beatrice replied. She felt her smile beginning to slip and immediately forced the corners of her lips back into place. This was not going as she had expected. Another tack was obviously needed. “My lord?”

“Yes, Miss Crowell?” Randson drawled, fixing his gaze a couple of inches above Beatrice’s head, his eyelids drooping as though he were half asleep.

“I am in a bit of a dilemma myself. I wonder if you could help me?”

“A gentlemen must always stand ready to help a lady in need,” Randson replied with a notable lack of enthusiasm. His shoulders rose and fell with an exceptionally deep sigh.

Beatrice gritted her teeth. Obviously there was more to Lord Randson than she had once thought, but she was determined to come out the winner in this game she had initiated. She looked up at the earl and smiled sweetly. “Just before you arrived, I was attempting to

invent some terrible character flaw I could attribute to my sister—something to diminish the interest of her more disagreeable admirers. Since, during our acquaintanceship in Bath, you obviously detected a serious imperfection in Chloe, I was hoping you might share that shortcoming with me.”

Beatrice realized with joy that her barb had struck a nerve. The Earl of Randson’s eyes widened and then quickly narrowed, even as he inhaled a bit too swiftly.

“Forgive me, Miss Crowell,” he said. His tone sounded strained. “I believe I see our hostess beckoning to me. We shall have to delay our discussion of your sister’s failings until another time. If you will excuse me.”

Beatrice stared for long seconds at the Earl of Randson’s back as he made his way to the other side of the room. There were times, she decided, when winning was simply not as much pleasure as one would have expected.

Soon after Randson’s departure, Mr. Dixon approached with Beatrice’s lemonade. She accepted it absently, thanked him and suggested he leave her to recover from her faint spell. She was in no way offended when he appeared overjoyed to accede to her suggestion and hurried away. Wanting to be alone so she could think, Beatrice managed to secrete herself on a chair positioned behind a large potted palm in a corner of the ballroom.

Five minutes later, she sat sipping her tepid lemonade and pondering her encounter with Randson when she felt a presence at her side. She glanced up into the face she had given up hopes of seeing that evening. When her gaze met that of the Marquess of Thayne, her heart gave a tiny leap, but she quickly squared her shoulders. Here was another male who had misjudged her sister. He deserved the same sort of setdown she had just delivered to Randson.

“Now why is such a lovely young lady sitting out a dance?” Thayne inquired. His smile, Beatrice noted, looked a bit strained, but she was in no mood to tender mercy merely because her quarry was not in top form.

“I am feeling a bit fatigued,” Beatrice replied with a prim pursing of her lips. “Besides, I have been well entertained. Your friend, the Earl of Randson, just left me. We had a most enlightening conversation.”

“You did?” Thayne’s eyes widened. “May I be permitted to know the topic of your discourse?”

Beatrice’s suspicions were immediately aroused. Thayne appeared much too interested in what she and Randson had been discussing. Watching him carefully, she said, simply, “Chloe.”

“What about Miss Chloe?” Thayne asked, his eyes darkened by some emotion Beatrice could not identify.

“Her shortcomings. Surely you have noticed them.”

Thayne shook his head. “I cannot say that I have noted any failings where your sister is concerned. She seems a most unobjectionable young lady to me, and I am sure Lord Randson shares my views.”

Liar, Beatrice thought while continuing to smile. “I am delighted to hear you say so, of course. One must always be pleased to find that one’s harsh judgment of another has been at fault, do you not agree?”

Thayne frowned, then flinched and quickly lifted a hand to massage his forehead. “Sorry,” he murmured. “My headache appears to be intensifying and I fear I’ve lost the thread of our conversation.” His gaze swept the room and he took a quick step backward. “Forgive me, Miss Crowell,” he said. “I believe I see our hostess motioning for me. If you will excuse me.”

He turned to walk away, but Beatrice had lost her prey to that excuse once this evening and had no intentions of allowing Thayne to escape too. With no clear idea of what she intended to do, she jumped to her feet and called out, “Lord Thayne.”

Thayne turned back to face Beatrice. She took one step, pretended to trip on the hem of her gown and lurched forward. Her lemonade splashed full into the Marquess of Thayne’s face. He stood unmoving for several seconds while the liquid dripped from his chin, slowly turning his snowy cravat a dingy yellow.

“Oh!” Beatrice exclaimed, suddenly recalling just how she’d felt when she accidentally shot the peacock. Gulping, she looked up into Thayne’s drenched face. He returned her gaze, and Beatrice, being no fool, could tell from the expression in his darkening eyes that he was perfectly aware that his baptism by lemonade had been no accident.

Thayne forced his lips to curve upward into a smile even as he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and began mopping his face. People crowded around him, their expressions of concern ranging from ill-disguised amusement to horror. But his only interest was in Beatrice Crowell. He stared directly into her horrified gaze, willing that his desires be written clearly in his eyes for her to read. For what he most wanted at that moment was to wrap his hands around her slender white neck and strangle her.

His smile broadened as Beatrice’s lips opened to form a silent “O” of distress. His gaze dropped to those lips and hung there. Why had he never noticed before how lovely they were? How soft, how full, how tempting? What he really desired, Thayne realized with a pang, was to

punish Miss Crowell by crushing those enticing lips in a passionate kiss.

He wrenched his gaze away.

What was wrong with him? Thayne shook his head briskly in hopes of clearing the cobwebs from his brain. The two matrons who had pressed close on either side of him gasped and jumped back as droplets of lemonade were flung from his hair into their faces. Thayne did not notice. He was too busy attempting to find some reason for his strange desires. They must be related to the evening's frustrations, what with Randson turning up unexpectedly, then making that uncanny guess about Richard Crowell. Yes, he was simply reacting to one too many frustrations. Still, he refrained from looking at Beatrice again.

Randson pushed his way through the crowd. "Thayne, are you all right?" he asked with a concerned frown.

"Perfectly," Thayne responded, turning toward his friend. "A small accident, that is all." He turned back to face Beatrice but managed to keep his gaze fixed above her head. "Miss Crowell, I pray you will think nothing more of this little mishap. I was just about to leave anyway. Randson, will you join me?"

"Yes, I think I will," Randson replied. Then, under his breath, "Couldn't get close to Miss Chloe anyhow."

But Thayne would not leave until he had assured himself that Beatrice was not left standing alone to face the consequences of her actions. He knew care was required in order to suppress conjectures about her apparent clumsiness. Only when her partner had arrived to claim her for the next dance did Thayne leave Beatrice's side.

Beatrice allowed herself to be led into the set that was forming, and into the next, and again into the next. She danced and smiled and laughed and, when the occasion called for it, indulged in a bit of harmless flirting. Not one of her partners over the next three hours was aware that she was silently cursing her own impetuosity. She was still furious with both Randson and Thayne because they had misjudged Chloe so badly in the past. At the same time, she wished she had given more thought to her revenge against Thayne. Her technique had been, at best, crude, and had obviously alerted Thayne to her antipathy. Besides, his obvious disgust with her had left her with a very unpleasant feeling that had settled like a stone deep in her stomach. Still, she was determined not to give in to such an illogical weakness and abandon her quest, despite the fact that revenge no longer promised to be sweet.

Chapter Seven

Thayne had assumed that nothing else could go wrong that evening. The discomfort of having a glass of lemonade tossed into his face, not to mention the frustration of Randson's having guessed a truth he was not supposed to know, should constitute more than any gentleman's share of troubles for one night, he was certain.

After leaving the Millnor's ball, he and Randson had stood on the pavement for a few minutes, engaged in a desultory conversation about what they would do next. Randson suggested they go to White's, but Thayne reminded him that—lemonade-soaked cravats being less than fashionable at the moment—he was not properly dressed for any activity other than going straight home. They eventually agreed to go their separate ways. Thayne declined Randson's offer of a ride. A nice, long walk, he hoped, would help him subdue his very strong desire to either strangle or kiss a certain young lady.

His hopes proved ill-founded. By the time he approached his town house, his confusion and sense of misuse had grown even stronger. After all, had he not gone out of his way to attempt to charm Beatrice Crowell? Had he not always treated her with courtesy? Had he not bent over backward trying to atone for his ill manners during that first meeting? So why did she dislike him so intensely that she would toss her lemonade into his face? And why had he reacted in such a peculiar way? Kissing Beatrice Crowell was the last thing a man in his right mind would desire.

Unhappily aware that several unanswerable questions would likely chase each other around in his brain for the remainder of that evening, Thayne decided to sequester himself in the library, down a bottle of port and then retire to bed to sleep off his headache and his certain inebriation. With such promising plans, he had actually worked up a smile when Wallace opened the door.

"Thank goodness you are home, my lord," the butler said by way of greeting.

Thayne stifled a groan. "What is it, Wallace?"

"A message, my lord, marked 'Most Urgent'. I have it right here." Wallace held out a silver tray on which rested a rather grubby sheet, awkwardly folded and sealed with an untidy blob of wax. The handwriting was almost illegible.

"Who delivered this?" Thayne asked, frowning as he reached for

the grimy missive.

"A boy, my lord. He was quite disreputable in appearance, and he refused to say who paid him to bring the message."

"Very well," Thayne said, sighing. He feared his plans for the remainder of the evening were about to be ruined. But not, he was determined, before he had at least one glass of wine. "I'll be in the library for a few minutes, Wallace. Bring me a bottle of port and then stand ready to order my curricule should I need it."

Alone in the library, Thayne carried a brace of candles to place on the table beside his favorite chair and then wearily lowered himself into the seat. The message could wait a moment, he decided. First he wished to divest himself of his cravat, which was drying to a sticky dampness smelling of too-sweet lemonade. That done, he reached for the message.

Trouble, he read. *Come as soon as possible. RC.*

His port forgotten, Thayne jumped to his feet and dashed toward the hallway just as Wallace arrived with a bottle and glass. "No time for that," Thayne informed the startled butler. "Order my curricule to be at the front door in fifteen minutes. I'll be changing clothes."

Richard Crowell looked as though he tangled with a pugilist and lost. His upper lip was split, his left eye was swollen, and his right arm rested in a sling.

"Are you sure they were merely after your money?" Thayne asked. He had poured Richard a glass of brandy and was now regarding his friend with a concerned frown.

"As sure as I can be of anything these days, I'm afraid. I wish I had realized sooner that they were after my winnings rather than my life. I assure you, I would have given in without a fight. As it was..." Richard shrugged, flinched from the pain his gesture evoked, and took a long swallow from the glass he held in his left hand.

"How many were there?"

"Three at least, although frankly, I was a bit too busy to stop and take a count. I suspect there was a fourth behind me who brought me down with a tap on my crown from his cudgel."

"You were unconscious for a while then?"

"A few minutes, I would say. Certainly long enough for them to have finished their task if murder was their object. Since they only stripped me of my money and a bit of jewelry I had won in a card game last week, I must assume they were mere footpads."

"So it would appear. Richard, I wish you would allow me to employ a servant for you. With that sprained right wrist, you cannot adequately care for yourself."

“Don’t worry. I’ve sent for Marshall, a cursedly loyal old retainer who has steadfastly refused to abandon me to my fate. He lives in rooms only a couple of miles from here and has been waiting for two years for me to come to my senses and send for him. He’ll badger me ruthlessly, but he will also take excellent care of me. The reason I sent for you, Thayne, is because you must take over the ciphers for me for a few weeks. I am rather inept with my left hand, as you probably concluded while reading my message.”

“I did note that your penmanship was somewhat less than elegant, so I understand why you cannot continue to encode messages. But Richard, I fear that cudgel did more than knock you unconscious for a few minutes. You are a candidate for Bedlam if you think I can decipher your ciphers or encode your codes.”

“I don’t expect you to do either. What you *can* do is communicate with Chloe. The two of you are living under the same roof, for heaven’s sake. All you have to do is serve as a courier between me and her. Nothing could be simpler.”

“Hmm. I suppose so,” Thayne replied, wishing he did not feel as though he was going to regret murmuring that agreement.

“Excellent. Now if you would be kind enough to look in that chest over there and retrieve the waistcoat that is embroidered with purple and orange roses...”

Thayne began rummaging about in an untidy drawer. “The things one must do for country and comrades,” he muttered, holding up a garment composed of particularly garish colors. “Richard, do you know how ugly this thing is?”

“Tis my own design, old boy, and, if I must say so myself, Brummel himself could not have done better—at least not for my purposes. I wanted something so atrocious that not even a burglar would be tempted to steal it. Now if you’ll just run your fingers up under the lining. Careful, please. Yes, there they are. The first batch of ciphers you need to take to Chloe. After what happened to me tonight, I am especially thankful that you have managed to placate my sisters. I doubt it was easy, at least where Bea was concerned.”

“There have been some sticky moments with Miss Beatrice,” Thayne admitted with a slightly twisted smile. He had been wishing for the last ten minutes that he had taken time to wash his neck and shoulders before responding to Richard’s message. He had never before realized how itchy a dry residue of lemonade could become.

It was past two in the morning before Thayne returned home. He had insisted on staying with Richard until his servant arrived. Marshall, a tiny man who reminded Thayne of a bantam rooster, had

walked in, looked at the battered Richard, glanced about his untidy rooms and clucked. Then, ignoring Richard's protests that any straightening up could wait until the morrow, Marshall had started to work. Thayne had exited quickly, aware that he was leaving Richard in excellent, if merciless, hands.

He wished he had as much confidence in his own capabilities as he did in Marshall's. He was aware, as Richard apparently was not, that seeing Chloe alone for even a moment was going to require more than a bit of ingenuity on his part. The fact that the twins were living under his roof would impede rather than facilitate any attempt at private conversation with Chloe. After all, in such circumstances, a gentleman was expected to exercise extreme caution lest he inadvertently place a lady in a compromising situation.

Besides, he had a very powerful hunch that should he even hint that he had something of a private nature to impart to Chloe, Beatrice would immediately become suspicious. She might not be as intelligent as her sister, but she was no nodcock either, even if she was the most frustrating female he had ever encountered.

It took two days for Thayne to arrange a private word with Chloe. On the morning after the ball, he had gone down to breakfast early and sat for an hour over his newspaper, praying that Chloe would be the first to join him. She was, but his mother was right behind her, so he sat for half an hour longer while the ladies ate. When Chloe at last pushed her plate away, he glanced out the window, pretended to notice for the first time that it was a sunny day and politely invited Chloe to take a turn in the garden with him. Chloe declined the invitation, explaining that she must write an overdue letter to her mother, but the marchioness said she would be delighted to accompany her son, declaring that a stroll was just what she needed to rid herself of the cobwebs that seemed to be infesting her head after such a late evening.

Thayne tried a different tack that afternoon, offering to take the twins for a drive in the park. With his mother along as chaperone, perhaps he could initiate a conversation that would involve the marchioness and Beatrice and allow him to whisper a few words to Chloe. Unfortunately, both girls declined, explaining that they were promised to other gentlemen for drives in the park that afternoon—Chloe with the Duke of Everston, Beatrice with the Duke's friend, Mr. Clarence Donalman.

Increasingly frustrated, Thayne abandoned his plans to spend that evening at White's and instead accepted an invitation to join his mother's party for an excursion to Vauxhall Gardens. Surely in those bustling surroundings, he convinced himself, he could seize a moment

when everyone's attention was otherwise occupied to whisper a few words into Chloe's ear.

Beatrice and Chloe, delighted at the prospect of visiting the famous pleasure gardens, were hurrying to dress, conscious of their godmother's request that they be ready to leave by seven o'clock.

"Did I tell you that Mr. Donalman claims there are over thirty-seven thousand lamps in the garden?" Beatrice asked while twitching her chemise into place.

"Yes, at least three times now. I wonder who counted them?" Chloe sat at the dressing table while Betty swept her golden curls onto the top of her head.

"The supplier, I would imagine," Beatrice replied, grinning. "We are going by water, are we not?"

"So the Duke said. There are to be fireworks tonight. Did you know that?"

"Yes. I can hardly wait. Which gown will you wear?"

"The blue, I think. Bea, what is your opinion of the Duke?"

Beatrice plopped down in a chair situated in such a way that she could observe her sister's face in the mirror. "The Duke seems rather pleasant, although a little stiff at times. And while his nose is a bit too sharp and his forehead rather high, there is really nothing in his appearance to repulse one."

"Faint praise," Chloe murmured.

"But not damning, certainly," Beatrice retorted. "After all, I hardly know the gentleman. What of his intellect?"

Chloe stood. "I am ready for my gown now, Betty. Which shawl should I wear, Bea?"

With a mental shrug, Beatrice rose to help Chloe select a shawl. Her sister might lack subtlety, but the gods had given her a generous serving of stubbornness. Chloe, Beatrice knew, had closed the subject on the Duke of Everston, which could only mean that she had no great respect for his mind.

The Marchioness of Thayne's party had swollen to ten people by the time they were ready to depart. In addition to her own household, the marchioness' guests included the Duke of Everston, his friend Mr. Donalman, the Marquess of Centrary, his mother and his sisters, Lady Evangeline and Lady Julia. At the last moment, Henrietta joined the party.

"I decided that I wish to hear the music," Henrietta declared, thumping down the stairs just before the party was to exit the front door. "I love music, you know. As my dearest Will said, music has power to soothe the savage beast."

Chloe immediately fell into a prolonged coughing spell, a sure sign, Beatrice knew, that something was wrong with Henrietta's quotation. Apparently Lady Thayne suspected the same thing, for she quickly bundled Henrietta into her carriage while suggesting that Beatrice and Chloe join the Duke and his mother in the Duke's barouche. The others in the party were to be taken up in Lord Thayne's town coach, which was to lead the way to the water gate where the party would board the boats that would carry them to Vauxhall.

For Thayne's objectives, the evening turned out to be a frustrating rout. The Duke of Everston rarely left Chloe's side, and on the one occasion when Thayne managed to maneuver himself into a chair beside Chloe in the supper box, Beatrice sat directly across from them. Each time he thought everyone's attention was directed elsewhere, affording him an opportunity to whisper into Chloe's ear, he would look up and find Beatrice's gaze fixed firmly on him. At last he gave up and devoted the rest of the evening to entertaining his Aunt Henrietta and Centrary's two sisters.

The following morning, in desperation, Thayne wrote Chloe a note and entrusted it to his valet to give to Chloe's maid with specific instructions that she was to pass it along to Chloe in strictest confidence. Thayne dreaded to think what conjectures the servants would deduce from his actions but decided he had no other choice. Richard was expecting him to return the following day with those ciphers decoded.

At eleven o'clock that morning, Thayne waited in his library, hoping Chloe would find some way to follow the instructions he had included in the note. He breathed a soft sigh of relief when, at five minutes past the hour, Chloe crept into the library. She eased the door closed behind her and hurried to Thayne's side. "You said in your note that Richard has need of me."

Thayne was impressed with Chloe's calm acceptance when he described her brother's situation. "Poor Richard," she said. "Thank goodness he has Marshall to watch over him." Then, "When can we begin working on the ciphers, my lord?"

"Tonight, I hope. Can you slip out of your bedchamber after your sister has gone to sleep? We could work here in the library, and when we have finished, I can return the ciphers to Richard."

"Yes, I feel sure I can manage," Chloe said. "Fortunately Beatrice sleeps very soundly. But I do not know when we shall be home tonight. We are scheduled to attend a musicale at the Sutton's. Do you go?"

“Yes. I would guess we shall return home by one o’clock in the morning. Can you stay awake until your sister has dropped off to sleep?”

“To help my brother? Of course,” Chloe said with raised brows. “If all goes well, I should be able to join you here by half past one. Now my lord, I had best go before Beatrice starts looking for me and becomes suspicious.”

Beatrice was already suspicious. Chloe had left her alone in the drawing room after murmuring a few vague words about running an errand. Chloe’s haste in exiting the room, plus the fact that she would not look her sister in the eye, had immediately made Beatrice suspect that Chloe was up to something.

But what?

Beatrice paced to the window and flicked back the curtain, but the sunny day did nothing to lighten her mood. She realized with a pang that she was growing increasingly depressed, a reaction she did not wish to examine too closely. Surely she was not feeling dejected because Thayne had spent much of yesterday trying to attract Chloe’s attention. That should not surprise her. Most men fell in love with Chloe sooner or later, and not always simply because she was beautiful. After all, Chloe was also sweet-natured. And she, Beatrice reminded herself, certainly did not alienate gentlemen by tossing her lemonade into their faces.

“Blast,” Beatrice murmured, wishing she could understand her own emotions. She also wished that Thayne was not pretending the lemonade incident had never happened. Not one word of recrimination had she heard from him. Was he not even curious as to why she had done it? That possibility made her feel worse than ever.

Beatrice was fighting back tears when the drawing room door opened and Chloe hurried in, her smile so bright that Beatrice’s suspicions were reinforced. She could always tell when Chloe’s smile was intended to distract. “You are back quickly,” she said, watching Chloe carefully. “I thought you said you were going to run an errand.”

Chloe dropped her gaze to the floor before looking up with an even brighter smile. “I changed my mind. Why don’t we go for a walk instead? The sun looks quite inviting this morning.”

“If you did not go out, then what have you been doing?” Beatrice asked, noting the slight flush that always touched Chloe’s cheeks when she was prevaricating.

“Oh nothing really. I ran into Lord Thayne and we chatted a moment. That is all. Now what about that walk?”

“No, thank you. I think I shall lie down for a few minutes instead.

I feel a headache coming on.”

Beatrice practically ran from the room, anxious to escape Chloe's concerned gaze as quickly as possible. Chloe, she was aware, knew her well enough to tell when something was troubling her, just as she knew Chloe well enough to detect when Chloe was trying to hide something. But this was one time Beatrice could not share her troubles with her sister. She could not explain, even to herself, why she was so upset by Chloe's apparent conquest of the Marquess of Thayne. After all, Beatrice reminded herself, she detested the man. At least most of the time.

Chapter Eight

Henrietta decided to attend the Sutton's musicale that evening after learning that the soprano who would be entertaining was one of her favorites. "Mrs. Thowheart sings like a bard," Henrietta informed the small party that had gathered in the drawing room while the coach was being brought around.

The marchioness ducked her head, Lord Thayne cleared his throat and Beatrice glanced toward Chloe to see how she was holding up under the liberties Henrietta continued to take with language. Chloe sat gazing toward a bare spot on the wall, a tiny frown of concentration on her forehead. If she had heard Henrietta, she gave no indication. In fact, Chloe had appeared unusually preoccupied all afternoon, and Beatrice, with a sinking heart, feared she knew whom her sister was thinking about.

As though aware of Beatrice's continuing scrutiny, Chloe became unusually animated during the carriage ride to the Sutton's. She chattered for several moments about an old journal she had discovered in the book room—a journal filled with delightful if peculiar recipes for everything from making soap to preparing poultices.

"How interesting," the marchioness responded politely. Then, more enthusiastically, she asked if Chloe had ever come across any recipes for making potpourri. "For I must confess," she continued, "that when I reside in the country, mixing potpourri is one of my favorite hobbies."

"Not in this particular book, my lady," Chloe replied. "But I am sure I have seen such recipes, if I can only recall where." She was mentioning the names of two possible sources when Henrietta interrupted her.

"Tonight's promised entertainment is the sort I enjoy," she informed her companions. "None of those silly breakfasts or morning calls for me. But a musicale! Everyone must enjoy good music. After all, as my dearest Will said, 'Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast'."

Chloe's groan was quite audible.

"Are you feeling ill, my dear?" the marchioness inquired while Beatrice reached to grasp her sister's hand and give it a warning squeeze.

"No, not at all, Lady Thayne," Chloe said quickly. "It is just that,

err, I...I am so frustrated at not being able to recall where I saw those recipes for potpourri.”

“Well, do not allow that to upset you, dear. Besides, we are almost at the Sutton’s. Oh my, look at the crowd. I fear this will be a terrible crush.”

“But worth it,” Henrietta declared, “to hear someone who sings like a bard.”

“Absolutely,” the marchioness replied with a deep sigh.

Since Mrs. Thowheart was not scheduled to sing until ten o’clock—forty-five minutes after the Thayne party arrived—they joined the dozens of other guests crammed into the Sutton’s drawing rooms.

“Stay close, girls,” Lady Thayne instructed Beatrice and Chloe. “I would prefer that we sit together to hear Mrs. Thowheart sing, but if we become separated in this crowd, I could never find you again before the concert begins.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Beatrice readily agreed. She had no desire to wander, even had she been able to move amidst the throngs of bodies that surrounded their party. Thayne was standing right beside her. Why, oh why was she allowing herself to bask in the pleasure of his company when he, like every other male she had ever known, was falling in love with Chloe?

“Yes, Mrs. Thowheart is a wonderful singer,” Henrietta boomed from just behind Beatrice. Chloe, standing slightly in front of Beatrice, started visibly and then took a deep breath as though trying to calm herself. Chloe was extremely on edge tonight, Beatrice reflected.

“An excellent singer,” an unknown lady behind Beatrice said in agreement. “I am prodigiously eager to hear her, as I am a lover of music.”

“As anyone must be who has an appreciation for the greatest of the arts,” Henrietta said. “As you are no doubt aware, even Shakespeare said of music that it has charms to soothe the savage beast.”

Glancing at Chloe, Beatrice was appalled to see her sister clamping her lips together and twirling to face Henrietta, a resolute expression on her face.

“Forgive me, my lady,” Chloe said in a firm tone. “I do not wish to appear impertinent, but William Congreve is one of my favorite authors, and I believe what *he* actually wrote was, ‘Music has charms to soothe a savage *breast*’.”

“Breast?” Henrietta repeated loudly, her strident and horrified tone immediately capturing the attention of those persons standing nearest the Thayne party.

Chloe gulped but squared her shoulders. “Yes. You see—”

“Breast?” Henrietta screeched again, this time in a near shout. Conversations within a ten-foot radius instantly quieted, while those closest to the contrempts stepped back, leaving the circle of Thaynes standing alone amidst a sea of avidly curious humanity.

“A *savage* breast?” Henrietta continued. Seemingly unaware of the sudden stillness around them, she maintained a volume that was gratifying to those persons standing several feet away. “My dear child, have you ever seen a savage breast?”

Although Chloe’s neck and face were quickly changing to a deep shade of crimson, she lifted her chin and looked directly into Henrietta’s eyes. “No, my lady, I have not, but Mr. Congreve did not intend a literal—”

“Of course you have never seen a savage breast,” Henrietta interrupted in a triumphant tone. “Babies suckle at their mothers’ breasts, my dear girl. Breasts are nurturing and life-giving, not savage. A savage breast indeed. Humph!”

“But the young lady is correct, you know.”

It took only a second for Beatrice to identify the voice behind her as Randson’s, so she didn’t bother to look around at him. Instead, she glanced into Henrietta’s face, where outrage and confusion vied for supremacy. Beatrice then looked at Chloe, whose countenance was turning white where just seconds before she had been scarlet.

“The author of that line actually was William Congreve, my dearest Lady Henrietta,” Randson continued, his tone composed but adamant. “And Congreve really did say that music can charm the savage *breast*, referring, of course, to the barbaric emotions that sometimes inhabit any man’s or woman’s breast—emotions such as you are perhaps experiencing at this very moment. There’s nothing more irritating than learning one has mistaken a quotation, or so I have always found.”

“Q-Q-Quite,” Henrietta stammered, glaring at Randson as though he had sprouted a set of horns.

“And my lovely Miss Crowell.” Randson stepped forward to grasp Chloe’s hand. “What a pleasure to see you again. You are looking exceptionally beautiful tonight, if an old friend may be permitted the liberty of saying so.”

Despite his defense of Chloe, Beatrice was far from ready to forgive him. She would have lunged forward to wrench the scoundrel away from her sister had not a firm grip on her arm prevented her from doing so. Momentarily confused, she glanced down at the hand on her elbow and then up into the warm gaze of the Marquess of Thayne. He shook his head only slightly, but Beatrice immediately subsided. She could not have moved anyway, because her foolish

knees had suddenly turned quite weak.

"I have not seen you since Bath," Randson was saying to Chloe. "Perhaps you have not heard that I was ill while we were there. I kept having strange spells of amnesia. I forgot my own mother's identity one day. I had the doctors in a pother, I can tell you. They still don't know the cause, but I seem to be much improved. I hope I did not inadvertently insult you, Miss Crowell. The first thing I knew, you and your family were gone, and I could not even remember your direction."

"Oh," Chloe said, staring at the earl with amazement and dawning hope clearly written in her eyes, much to Beatrice's disgust. Surely her sister did not believe Randson's blatant fabrication. After all, his face had darkened to a dull red, and he tugged at his cravat as though his words were about to choke him. Unfortunately, Chloe seemed unaware of these clear signs of his guilt and instead stood looking up at him as though he had just ridden to her rescue on a white charger, snatching her from the jaws of a voracious beast.

"He really loves her, you know." A soft whisper sounded in Beatrice's ear, sending chills dashing down her spine. She looked up into Thayne's brilliant blue eyes and felt her stomach plummet so quickly she turned dizzy. He did not appear at all abashed at the possibility of Chloe's being snatched away from him by his best friend.

After taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, Beatrice decided she surely had her voice under control again. Not to mention her common sense. "Do you believe his tale?" she asked, looking directly into Thayne's eyes.

Thayne did not look away from her gaze, although a slight frown touched his forehead. "Do you not?" he asked.

"You must admit it sounds a bit farfetched," Beatrice responded, trying to read Thayne's thoughts in his eyes. This, she found, was impossible. Thayne's expression was carefully noncommittal.

"Stranger things have been known to happen," he said. "Besides, I have known Randson since we were children. I would trust him with my life."

"Perhaps," Beatrice agreed with a frown. "But would you trust him with your sister's happiness?"

"Without a second's hesitation. And I believe, Miss Crowell, that you may do the same. As I said, he loves her very much."

Half an hour later while Mrs. Thowheart was entertaining the company, it occurred to Beatrice that Thayne had no sister and thus could not be expected to appreciate what it would mean to entrust her happiness to his friend, the Earl of Randson.

By three o'clock that morning, the Marquess of Thayne had discovered that he possessed a natural talent for deciphering, which was fortunate because Chloe had contributed little to their task. She obligingly stared at the ciphers, but judging by the oblivious expression on her face, Thayne feared she rarely focused upon their content.

"Just one more to go, Miss Crowell," Thayne said with forced enthusiasm. Randson, he had decided, was welcome to the lovely Chloe. He himself found her company extremely frustrating. "I wonder if you would be kind enough to look over this decoding I just completed."

Chloe obediently reached for the paper Thayne held out to her, but she merely glanced at it before looking up into his eyes. "Do you believe in the existence of this malady called amnesia?" she asked.

Biting back a groan, Thayne looked into her hope-filled eyes and responded carefully. "I have seen such a phenomenon before, you know. Perhaps you are not aware that I was with Wellington until a year ago. I have seen men, particularly after battles, forget their own names. Usually the memory lapse was temporary unless precipitated by a head wound. Even the doctors were at a loss to understand the causes, although I always suspected that the pressures of battle contributed to the affliction."

"Lord Randson was in combat, was he not?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, he suffered a shoulder wound so severe he was forced to resign."

"Ah," Chloe said, her lovely eyes suddenly sparkling like a forest brook on a sunny day. "I see." A tiny smile lifted the corners of her lips as she quickly looked down at the cipher she still held in her hand. "This is extremely good work, my lord. You obviously have a natural talent for deciphering."

"Thank you," Thayne murmured. "I shall begin working on this last one while you check my work."

"Very well," Chloe readily agreed, then spent the next ten minutes looking down at a piece of paper describing troop movements and smiling dreamily to herself.

"There, I think this is finished," Thayne said at last. "I shall return these to your brother tomorrow morning and see if he has more work for us. If so, we shall need to meet here again tomorrow evening. However, I can hardly continue sending clandestine notes to you without thoroughly arousing suspicion among the servants. After giving the matter some thought, I feel the safest way to communicate with you is through flowers."

"Flowers?"

“Yes. Each day I shall send you eleven roses from an anonymous admirer—white roses if we do not need to meet, red roses if we do.”

“Very well,” Chloe agreed, rather absently. A tiny frown replaced her former exuberant expression. “Lord Thayne, I have been wondering about something.”

“Yes?” A feeling of unease replaced Thayne’s pleasure at having finished their task.

“Is Lord Randson also involved in this work that you and Richard are doing?”

“No.”

Chloe’s frown deepened. “So he is not aware that Richard is deciphering messages?”

Unsure where this was leading, Thayne decided to answer cautiously. “I really could not say.”

Chloe jumped to her feet and began pacing about the room, her face clearly reflecting her sudden surge of fury. “It just occurred to me. How could I have been such a fool? Now I recall so clearly. The day after Richard visited me in Bath was the day Lord Randson so obviously snubbed me.”

She stopped pacing to turn and glare at Thayne. “Have you any idea, my lord, how it feels to approach someone who claims to adore you, only to have that person turn and saunter away as though you were of no more importance than a pesky fly? I do. And now, at last, I understand why. He saw me with my brother and jumped to a very erroneous and insulting conclusion. Amnesia, indeed! Does he think me such a fool? Never have I been so furious! Well, my lord, you may tell your friend, the Earl of Randson, that I never wish to see him again because, in addition to being a cad, he is also a prevaricator. And if he should ever approach me again, we shall see how *he* enjoys being snubbed.”

With a final glare clearly conveying the impression that she hated the Marquess of Thayne fully as much as she detested his closest friend, Chloe turned and stalked from the room, closing the door ungently behind her.

Thayne stared after her for long seconds. Then, with an audible groan, he rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. “Yes, Richard,” he muttered to the shadows thrown by the flickering candles, “I can honestly say that I have successfully placated your sisters. Discounting, of course, the fact that both now appear to hate me.”

Chapter Nine

"I take leave to tell you, Richard, that your sisters are the most infuriating young ladies I have ever encountered." The Marquess of Thayne, after two hours of sleep, had arisen to deliver the precious ciphers into Richard Crowell's hands. Slumped now in one of Richard's well-brushed chairs, he cupped a mug of Marshall's coffee in his hands. His sigh was deep and disheartened. "Despite my best efforts, both of your sisters now detest me."

"I tried to warn you," Richard said, first grinning and then wincing as his cut lip protested.

Thayne lifted his chin from his chest long enough to glare across the room at his host. "Ha! As though anyone could be adequately warned about those two. Of course I can almost understand why Miss Chloe dislikes me, although I swear I had no idea Randson was going to fabricate that ill-advised tale. He should have realized that your sister is far too intelligent to believe such a foolish invention for very long. As for Miss Beatrice's tossing the contents of her glass into my face..."

Richard turned solemn. "I say, Thayne, just what did you do to cause Bea to fling her lemonade at you?"

Thayne straightened in his chair, his expression a mingling of frustration and hauteur. "I asked her to excuse me for a moment so that I might greet our hostess. Abominable behavior on my part, don't you agree? No doubt you will wish to call me out for treating your sister with such disrespect. I shall, of course, be happy to oblige you just as soon as your arm—"

Thayne's soliloquy was interrupted by a hoot of laughter. Richard had fallen backward onto his newly refurbished sofa and lay there chuckling for several minutes. When he finally quieted and pulled himself into a sitting position, he looked across the room, grinned and said with twitching lips, "Just be glad you aren't a peacock." Then, for reasons incomprehensible to his guest, he fell backward laughing again.

"Must run in the family," Thayne muttered to himself, shaking his head.

"Yes, my lord," a voice sounded from slightly behind Thayne's chair, causing him to start. "More coffee?" Marshall asked. "Or something stronger, perhaps? You must forgive Master Richard. He is just recalling when Miss Beatrice shot the peacock. It was an accident,

of course. Miss Beatrice doesn't have a malicious bone in her body. A bit mischievous, perhaps, but never malicious."

"You have been with the family for a number of years?" Thayne asked, observing Marshall with sudden interest.

"Yes, my lord. Since before the twins were born. In fact, I recall when Master Richard was a boy and—"

"That will be all, Marshall," Richard interrupted brusquely.

Marshall opened his eyes rather wide, then bowed stiffly and turned to exit the room with stately and measured steps, his head held unnaturally erect.

"You've offended the fellow," Thayne remarked with raised eyebrows after watching Marshall's rigid departure.

"I wish that were true," Richard said with a deep sigh. "But I shall not allow myself to hope for such good fortune. The moment you walk out the door, he'll be back in here, browbeating me. You would not believe the abuse I suffer at the hands of that—"

A knock on the door interrupted Richard's tirade.

Marshall appeared so promptly that it was clear his retreat had not taken him far. "Am I to assume you are not at home to other visitors, sir?" he asked, his tone decidedly cool.

"Lord, yes," Richard responded cheerfully. "'Tis probably just a tradesman dunning me anyway."

Despite Richard's casual conjecture, there was a note in his voice that alerted Thayne to his host's sudden tension. Although Richard had not changed his posture, he was no longer relaxed, appearing instead ready to pounce should the need arise.

Both men listened in silence as Marshall walked toward the front door, fumbled for a moment with the lock and then lifted the latch. "Miss B-B-B—" he stammered.

"Hello, Marshall," a feminine voice responded brightly. "No need to ask if my brother is here. You would not be so startled were he not. Well, move aside, man. I wish to see Richard, and you shall not stop me unless you wish to throw me physically into the street."

Richard moaned softly and then jumped to his feet as Beatrice swept into the room. Within seconds he was sprawled on the sofa again from the force of his little sister's greeting.

"Lord, Bea, there isn't any cause to attack me," he grumbled while returning Beatrice's enthusiastic hug. "Here, brat, stand back so I can take a look at you. Lord, if you haven't grown. A fine young lady now, I see. But still a hoyden for all that."

"How can you say so, Richard?" Beatrice demanded, pretending to be affronted. "Especially when—from the looks of you—one must assume you are still fond of fisticuffs. Have you broken your arm

again?"

"No, it's merely a sprain, and Marshall has wrapped it so tightly, it barely hurt at all when you slammed me down onto the sofa a few minutes ago."

"Thank goodness for Marshall," Beatrice said, then rushed to give her brother's servant a hug. "You do not think me a hoyden, do you, my old friend?"

"What a question to ask a man, Miss Bea," Marshall objected, a bright flush creeping up his face as Beatrice clutched him to her breast. "Give over, now, do. I'll just go put on a pot of tea." Pushing himself from her embrace, the little man practically ran from the room.

"I wish I could rout Marshall as easily as you do, brat," Richard complained. "Do you suppose, were I to hug him with your enthusiasm—"

A sharp tap on the shoulder from his sister interrupted Richard's conjectures. "I may be a brat, but you are a beast," she informed him. "Oh, Richard. How could you have allowed me to believe such horrible things about you?"

Richard ignored her question and instead asked one of his own. "It isn't that I'm not glad to see you, brat, but I can't help wondering—how did you find me?"

Beatrice blushed, even as she thinned her lips and lifted her chin. "I hired a hackney to follow the marquess this morning."

"How did you know where I would be going?" Thayne asked with a quick frown.

Beatrice turned to him and lifted her chin. "I may not be as intelligent as my sister, my lord, but I am not entirely stupid either. I was awake when Chloe slipped out of our chamber last evening. I followed her to the library and was soon able to ascertain what the two of you were doing."

"You mean you were eavesdropping," Richard said.

Choosing to ignore her brother's comment, Beatrice continued her explanation to Thayne. "I assumed you would be returning the ciphers to Richard early this morning, so I arose early myself and then followed you."

"Hen-witted," Richard commented to no one in particular, but Beatrice immediately swung around to confront him. Tears sparkled on the tips of her eyelashes.

"Is that why Chloe was allowed to know what you have been about while I was kept in the dark? Did you think I lacked the intelligence to keep quiet?"

"Never, brat," Richard responded, wrapping an arm around her

shoulders and pulling her into a warm embrace. "Twas not your lack of brains but your overabundance of loyalty that concerned me. I was afraid you would someday overhear a disparaging remark about me and jump to my defense, informing my critic that I was only pretending to be a worthless wastrel while secretly working for the War Office. Now admit, my little impetuous sister, that such a scenario is not an improbability."

Beatrice had the grace to flush. "That might have been true even a year or so ago," she said, "but I hope I possess more discretion now."

"I hope so too," Thayne remarked grimly. "With your new knowledge, you have the power to do a great deal of harm."

Beatrice's eyes flashed with anger. "You may be assured, my lord, that I will not—"

"Bea," Richard interrupted. "Where is your maid? Is she waiting with the hackney?"

"Oh dear," Beatrice murmured, biting her lip and glancing about the room as though searching for some diversion. "I swear I am dying of thirst. Where is Marshall with that tea?"

Richard refused to be distracted. "You *did* bring a maid with you, did you not, Bea?"

"Not exactly," Beatrice replied, continuing to look at everything in the room except her brother.

"My God! You actually came to this part of town alone in a hackney? I cannot believe even you would be so addlepat."

Beatrice squared her shoulders and finally managed to look at her brother. As she had expected, his gaze was serious and disapproving. "I realize it was unwise of me to come here alone," she admitted, resorting to her most chagrined, little-girl smile. "But you see, I did not know you lived in such a dangerous area." Seeing that her brother's frown was showing no signs of softening, Beatrice added, more defensively, "Besides, I asked the hackney driver to wait for me. I can hardly be blamed because he refused."

Richard opened his mouth to deliver a sharp retort but was forestalled by Thayne. "This is no time for a family quarrel," he said. "Never fear, Richard. I shall see your sister safely home in my own coach."

The thoughts of riding several blocks enclosed in a carriage with the disapproving marquess held no appeal to Beatrice. Lifting her chin, she gazed down her nose through narrowed eyes. "How very generous of you, my lord," she said, her tone frigid, "but I am sure my brother—"

Another knock on the door interrupted Beatrice, who glanced

from Richard's sudden frown to Thayne's tense expression and decided to remain silent.

"Perhaps you should instruct Marshall to ignore—" Thayne began. He quieted immediately as a handsome face was thrust around the door leading to the outside hallway.

"Hello, Captain Balcorn," Richard said. "Blast, but my memory is growing prodigiously unreliable. Was I expecting you this morning?"

"No," the blond visitor responded, stepping fully into the room. "But you must have been expecting someone. Your door was cracked. Ah, I see you already have guests—and such a lovely one too." Flashing Beatrice a wide smile, the gentleman squared his shoulders and straightened his muscular frame to its full five feet, eleven inches, striking a pose that suggested he was well aware of how attractive he appeared in his regimentals.

"We must be going," Thayne said, stepping forward to grip Beatrice's elbow and giving it a warning squeeze.

"Yes," Beatrice agreed. There was something about the handsome Captain Balcorn that had earned her instant antipathy. Perhaps, she decided, it was his apparent assurance that any woman must find him irresistible. That and the faintly dangerous aura that appeared to hover about him.

"There is no need to rush off on my account, Lord Thayne," Balcorn said. Although his tone was congenial, mocking laughter flickered in his eyes.

Thayne shot Balcorn a puzzled glance. "You must accept my apologies. I was not aware that we had met, Mister...?" Thayne paused, his eyebrows raised in a question.

"No need for apologies, my lord. We have not met, but I have known your identity for years. I am Captain Balcorn, and, I fear, I am also *de trop* just at the moment. So, if you will excuse me." With a hasty bow and a half smile that twisted the corners of his lips upward, Balcorn turned and hurried back toward the small hallway leading to the door. "I shall call upon you later, Crowell," he called back over his shoulder just before closing the door behind him.

"I do not care for your friend, Richard," Beatrice informed her brother with a small frown. "There was something in his manner that was rather unpleasant."

Richard ignored her. "You will see my sister safely home?" he asked Thayne, gazing at the marquess with an expression Beatrice thought peculiarly intense.

"Certainly. We had best leave immediately."

"Yes," Richard agreed. He turned to Beatrice. "Well, brat, you have found me out, but I cannot claim to be terribly displeased. I have

enjoyed your visit, but you must not come here again, you know.”

“I know, Richard,” Beatrice answered softly, blinking back tears. “You may count on me, you know, to keep mum, but I do want you to know how extremely proud I am of you.”

“None of that now,” her brother responded gruffly before pulling her into a fierce hug and then pushing her away. “You go along with Thayne now, and behave yourself.”

Beatrice nodded, not trusting herself to speak again.

Thayne’s coach awaited them just outside the door to Richard’s building, the coachman sitting alone on his box.

“I fear I am inconveniencing you, my lord,” Beatrice said, pausing to frown at the handsome carriage as though it had personally affronted her. “I must assume you had planned a journey of some sort since you are in your coach rather than your curricule or phaeton.”

“No inconvenience at all, Miss Crowell,” Thayne assured her, stepping forward to open the door and let down the steps. “I would have brought at least one footman had I been anticipating a journey. Actually, my coachman fears one of the coach’s spokes is weak, and, since he was taking the coach to have that checked this morning anyway, I decided to go along and talk to the coach-maker about refurbishing the interior. I have always disliked this particular shade of green and would prefer something lighter. What do you think?”

Beatrice allowed herself to be handed into the coach while trying to ignore the sudden buzzing in her head as the warmth of Thayne’s hand penetrated her gloves. “I think this is a rather attractive shade of green, my lord,” she lied, flashing him a bright—if insincere—smile. Her irritation with the man was growing by leaps and bounds. What right did he have to be constantly proving her wrong about him? And what right did he have to be working first with her brother and then with her sister while treating her as though she was unworthy of trust and incapable of contributing to their efforts?

“Have I offended you in some way, Miss Crowell?” Thayne seated himself across from Beatrice and regarded her with eyes that looked suspiciously cheerful.

“Whatever makes you suspect that you have offended me, my lord? Do you assume that merely because I disagree with you about this lovely shade of green, I must be offended?”

A small frown touched Thayne’s brow as the carriage swayed. “I wonder why the coachman is getting down,” he murmured. “Perhaps I did not make my intentions clear to him after all.” He was reaching for the door when it was suddenly pulled open. A smiling Balcorn stuck his head inside.

“Excuse me,” he said. Then he stepped back and looked up toward

the box. "No need to get down on my account, coachman," he called. "I'll just let myself in if Lord Thayne agrees to take me up."

The coach swayed again as the coachman apparently pulled himself back onto his seat.

"You need a ride?" Thayne asked, his tone less than welcoming.

"Just four or five blocks, if you don't mind," Balcorn said, his smile bright and wide. "I had asked my hackney driver to wait, but for some reason, he did not."

"I'm sorry, but I fear we cannot accommodate you," Thayne replied. "We are in a hurry, so if you will excuse us..."

"Suspicious so soon, my lord?" Balcorn asked, his smile widening into a grin as he shifted slightly toward his left and lifted his right arm. A pistol was pointed directly toward Beatrice's chest. "Now Miss Crowell, if you would be so kind as to change seats and sit next to his lordship, I will avail myself of your place where I can keep both of you covered."

Beatrice suppressed a gasp of fright, willing herself to appear calm despite the fact that the blood had started pounding so loudly in her ears she feared her companions could detect it. A glance at Thayne revealed that he also appeared composed, although his lips had tightened perceptibly. He nodded at her briefly, even as he slid to one side to create space beside him.

As soon as Beatrice moved to sit next to Thayne, Balcorn eased into the coach, keeping his weapon constantly trained upon Beatrice. Then, still grinning, he signaled for the coachman to start, and the carriage pulled slowly away from the curb, turned at the next corner and headed for a route that would take them out of the city.

Chapter Ten

As Beatrice stared at the weapon pointed toward her chest, Chloe was awakening to discover that, although she had slept until almost ten o'clock, she felt far from rested. As memories of the previous evening flooded back, she blushed to recall just how little she had helped Thayne with their chore. At first she had been mooning too much about Randson to concentrate on ciphers. Then, after she'd gone to bed, she'd been too furious to go to sleep.

Now staring up into the bed-hangings, Chloe tried to hold back tears while clinging to the outrage that had inundated her the night before. When that anger faded, she realized, there would be a void left behind that would quickly fill with anguish. She remembered that emotion too well from Randson's having snubbed her in Bath. She had lived with that pain for months. Now she must face the knowledge that he had misjudged her and then lied to her about his reasons.

Taking a deep breath, Chloe struggled to subdue the sob building in her chest that threatened to tear into her throat. Whatever she did, she must hide her distress from her sister, who would probably take it upon herself to seek revenge. Beatrice was so—

Beatrice! Chloe sat up in bed and looked around the bedchamber she shared with her sister, then sighed with relief. Beatrice had apparently already gone downstairs and was probably even now sitting at the breakfast table, mentally preparing a few teasing remarks about her sister's indolence. Chloe tossed back the bedclothes and bounded to her feet, anxious to dress and get downstairs before Beatrice suspected that something was wrong.

But neither Beatrice nor any other family member was at the breakfast table. Chloe couldn't find her sister in the library or in any of the drawing rooms. None of the servants could recall having seen Beatrice that morning, and Chloe was beginning to feel a bit uneasy. Surely if her sister had gone out, she would have left a message.

Pausing in the entry hall while trying to decide where to look next, Chloe was startled by an unusually persistent banging upon the front door. Biting her lip, she reflected that only someone with an urgent errand—such as telling her that Beatrice had been involved in an accident—would demand entry so vigorously. Her stomach knotted with anxiety while she waited impatiently for the footman to open the door.

"I wish to see Miss Chloe," a familiar voice announced, just before

the door was thrust open from without. The Earl of Randson stalked into the hallway and then stopped dead still when he caught sight of Chloe standing not five feet away. "Chloe," he murmured, staring at her with widened eyes.

Although her heart still leapt at the sight of the earl, Chloe tightened her lips and lifted her chin, willing her scorn to be written clearly in her gaze. "Lord Randson! I suppose I should not be surprised to see you. You have no doubt received a visit from Lord Thayne this morning."

"No, I have n-n-not," Randson stammered, his expression of determination deteriorating into one of puzzlement. "Should I have?"

Chloe felt her outrage crumbling. She had assumed that Lord Thayne had rushed to warn his friend about her deductions of the previous evening. Apparently she was wrong. But not as wrong as Randson had been about her. "If you have not talked with Lord Thayne, then why are you here?" she asked.

"To see you, of course. Where can we talk?"

Chloe heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I fear it is far too late for talking, my lord. I would prefer that you leave."

"Not before I've told you what I came here to say," Randson said, his chin jutting out.

"Very well," Chloe said. "We can talk in here." Turning on her heel, she marched ahead of him into the library where she seated herself in a chair that was in plain view of the entry hall.

Undeterred, Randson pulled a chair close and seated himself facing Chloe. He reached out to take her hands, which had been clenched in her lap, and flinched when she instantly jerked both away. "You have already guessed," he said heavily. "I wish you had not. I came here to confess to you."

"How noble of you," Chloe replied, affecting her most cutting tone. She looked into Randson's eyes and then immediately looked away. The blasted man's expression reminded her of a puppy that had been scolded by its master, and she struggled to keep her resolve from weakening. Her tone bordered on bitterness when she asked, "And to which of your calumnies were you prepared to admit, my lord?"

Randson groaned softly. "You have guessed the whole of it, haven't you?"

"I certainly hope so, my lord. If your transgressions involve more than misjudging me and then fabricating a ridiculous story in an attempt to conceal your original mistake, I would prefer not to know about it." Chloe's frigid diatribe ended with a gasp of dismay. The Earl of Randson had dropped to his knees in front of her and was gazing up at her with pleading eyes.

“Miss Chloe, can you ever forgive me?” he asked, clasping his hands together beneath his chin.

Her face burning, Chloe glanced toward the hallway. “Do stand up, my lord. The servants will see you.”

“I do not care who sees me. I shall stay here until I have your answer. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Har!” Henrietta’s strident tones sounded from the open doorway. Her jaw was set in firm lines and a frown furrowed her high forehead. “Have I stumbled upon a proposal?”

“No,” Chloe shrieked, her voice breaking as she tried to jump to her feet, only to find herself being pushed back into her chair by the earl.

“Was that ‘no’ in answer to my question or to Lady Henrietta’s?” he demanded, a resolute expression on his face.

“N-n-neither,” Chloe stammered. “I mean both. Oh I don’t know. This is most embarrassing. Please stand up, Lord Randson.”

“Not until you answer me.”

“Don’t wish to distract you,” Henrietta said, belying her words by stalking into the room and then stopping to stare down at the still-kneeling earl. “I was looking for my nephew. Have either of you seen him?”

“I have not,” Chloe murmured, dropping her head and staring at her clenched hands. She had begun to pray that this nightmare would end. She would have preferred that anyone other than Henrietta had happened upon her in such a humiliating situation.

“Nor have I,” Randson replied, tilting his head back to look up at Henrietta. “Perhaps he’s gone out.”

Chloe suppressed an unladylike desire to wrap her hands around the earl’s exposed throat and squeeze firmly.

“Nodcock,” Henrietta responded, but without rancor. “Do you suppose I hadn’t thought of that? As a matter of fact, I happen to know that he did go out at seven o’clock this morning in the traveling coach. But he took neither grooms nor footmen with him, and even his valet doesn’t know where he’s gone—just that he didn’t take a change of clothing with him.”

“That’s peculiar.” Randson frowned as he scrambled to his feet.

With a gasp of relief, Chloe seized the opportunity to stand. “Perhaps Lady Thayne knows where his lordship has gone,” she offered.

“I doubt that,” Henrietta said. “She received word this morning that the housekeeper at Chiloath is extremely ill. Sophia is very fond of the housekeeper and wanted to ensure that the woman receives good care, so she has gone to the country for a few days. She asked

me to apprise everyone here of her plans. That is why I am searching for Thayne."

"Perhaps he also received news of the housekeeper's illness and has gone after his mother," Randson suggested.

"No, for he left before her, and if he had known the housekeeper was ill, he would not have rushed off in the traveling coach when he could have guessed his mother would wish to accompany him. As it was, Sophia had to take the landau and the second coachman."

I believe I know where Lord Thayne may have gone," Chloe said, suddenly recalling her and Thayne's activities of the evening before. "But I do not understand why he would have taken the traveling coach to go less than three miles."

Randson glanced at her sharply. "Was he to return some material this morning to the friend with whom he has been collaborating?"

"Yes," Chloe said on a sigh of relief, suddenly thankful for Randson's ability to think quickly.

"Can you give me that friend's direction?"

"Yes, of course, but..."

"But what, my dear?"

Chloe decided to ignore that endearment for the moment. "I am also concerned about Beatrice. Lady Henrietta, do you have any knowledge of my sister's whereabouts?"

"You mean Beatrice is missing too? Well, well, the plot thickens!"

"Except for the fact that this is not a play," Chloe retorted rather sharply. "I am concerned about Beatrice."

"Could she have accompanied Thayne?" Randson asked.

"No, for she had no knowledge of his activities or of his errand this morning," Chloe answered. Then, with a frown, "At least, I do not think she knew anything."

The sound emanating from the Earl of Randson might have been described as a snort in a man of lesser rank. "If I know anything about your sister's personality, I would lay odds she has figured out what you have been doing and that she followed Thayne this morning as well."

"I fear you may be right," Chloe said. "Will you please visit Richah, that is, Lord Thayne's friend soon?"

"I'll leave immediately, and I promise you that I shall return as quickly as possible to share with you what I've learned."

"Thank you," Chloe said, smiling weakly as she allowed Randson to take her hand and give it a comforting squeeze. "I'll just write out the address for you."

Two hours later, Chloe had given up pacing and sat slumped in a chair by the window in the library where she stared numbly into the street beyond. Her imagination had already devised five hideous ways in which Beatrice, Thayne and Randson could have died.

“No need to look so glum, girl,” Henrietta said, glancing up from the sheet of paper on which she had been scribbling for the last half hour. “I have a feeling the death coach won’t be stopping by here this morning.”

Chloe stifled a sigh and turned to thank her vexatious companion for those unwanted words of comfort. She had long since given up trying to like Henrietta. Now it was becoming a chore to tolerate her. But Chloe had been raised to show respect for her elders, and this she intended to do, even when those elders were so unwise as to mention death coaches when Chloe’s nerves were near to flying apart.

“Thank—” Chloe began, only to jerk back around as the sound of a carriage in the street claimed her attention. Pushing aside the curtains, she peered out of the window, her heart pounding in her throat.

Fortunately, no ghostly carriage driven by the grim reaper awaited her frantic gaze. Instead, the Earl of Randson calmly pulled his blacks to a halt. Motioning for his groom to go to the horses’ heads, he vaulted from the curricule and hurried toward the front door.

“He’s back,” Chloe murmured, jumping to her feet and then quickly sinking back into her chair. It would not do to rush out into the hallway to greet him. After all, they could not talk in front of the servants.

“The Earl of Randson,” Wallace announced. Chloe stood as Randson stepped into the room. Waiting only until the door was closed behind him, she demanded, “Well?”

He hurried to her side and grasped the hands she unthinkingly held out to him. “Thayne and Miss Beatrice are gone,” he said.

“D-d-dead, you mean?” Chloe asked, her voice breaking.

“Good God, no,” Randson responded. “Kidnapped, apparently.”

Chloe fought back the darkness that threatened to envelop her, but she could not hold her voice steady when she spoke. “Kidnapped? Merciful heavens! What on earth can you mean, my lord?”

Randson repeated what Richard had told him of Thayne’s, Beatrice’s and Balcorn’s visits that morning. “Then,” he continued, “perhaps ten minutes after Thayne and Miss Beatrice left Richard’s rooms, Thayne’s coachman stumbled in. He had been knocked in the head and left in an alley to recover. A message for Richard was pinned to his sleeve. It said that Lord Thayne and Miss Crowell had been taken but would be in no danger as long as Richard did not attempt to

locate them. The message also said that Richard was being watched and, if he followed orders, would receive further instructions soon.”

“Good heavens!” Chloe murmured. “Can Richard do nothing to help Lord Thayne and Beatrice?”

“At the moment, no. He is certain he is being watched and fears any attempt on his part to search for Thayne and Miss Beatrice would endanger their lives. Fortunately, I am under no such restrictions. I watched carefully when I left your brother’s rooms to be certain I wasn’t followed myself, and then I sent my groom to seek information on the direction Thayne’s coach took when it left Richard’s street. There must be dozens of people in that part of town who would have noticed it. Coaches with crests on the doors are not common in that area. As soon as my groom brings me word of the direction, I’m off to see what I can learn.”

“And I’m coming with you,” Chloe announced.

Randson stared at her for several seconds, then shook his head. “Can’t,” he said.

“Yes I can.” Chloe squared her shoulders. “My sister is in danger. If you think I can sit here quietly while—”

“No chaperone,” Randson interrupted. “Besides, I’m driving my curricule, and there wouldn’t be room for a chaperone even if we had one.”

“Very well,” Chloe said, thrusting her chin out. “Then I shall ask that a horse be saddled and I shall follow you.”

“Now see here, Chloe—” Randson began, only to be interrupted by Henrietta.

“I’ll go along as chaperone,” she said. “Sophia left me in charge of the twins. One’s already gone. I can’t have the other haring off on a horse in pursuit of your curricule and ending up heaven knows where. Yes, I shall go.”

“But Lady Henrietta, I assure you, there’s no need. Miss Chloe isn’t going.”

“Yes, I am,” Chloe said. Then, on a deep breath, she looked directly into Randson’s eyes. “You owe me this, my lord,” she said softly but firmly.

Randson returned her stare for long seconds. A flush colored his cheeks. Chloe could not judge whether he was angry or merely concerned, nor did she care at that moment. She merely knew she had to go after her twin. Finally Randson sighed. “You win,” he said. “I’ll go home and order the coach be made ready.”

“No need for that,” Henrietta spoke up. “Your curricule will be faster. I’ll sit in the groom’s seat.”

For a moment, Chloe feared Randson was suffering from an

apoplexy, so red did his face become. And she feared she herself teetered on the edge of hysteria as she fought to suppress a giggle while imagining the formidably framed Henrietta crammed into the diminutive groom's seat at the back of Randson's fashionable curricle.

"I a-a-assure you, ma'am," Randson stammered. "The coach would be more comfortable."

"That is true, my lady," Chloe said, feeling she owed it to Randson to support him. After all, she had forced him into this unconventional situation. "Besides, we do not know how long we shall be away, so we should certainly take at least one change of clothing with us."

"True," Henrietta agreed. Then, shrugging her broad shoulders, she stood. "I'll just go begin directing my packing. We shall be ready by the time you return, Randson."

"I must begin my packing also," Chloe said, turning to scamper from the room in Henrietta's wake. She realized her behavior was cowardly, but she had no desire to be alone with Randson. After all, he now had almost as much reason to be furious with her as she had had to be angry with him earlier in the day.

Chapter Eleven

“What have you done with my coachman?” Thayne asked after several moments of silence in which Balcorn sat across from his captives, occasionally glancing out the window but never dropping his guard.

“Nothing fatal, I assure you,” Balcorn responded with a complacent smile. “He’ll soon be able to complete his role in this little farce. He will be carrying a message from me to my dear friend Richard in which I have explained that, should Richard choose to institute a search, both you and this lovely lady will die.”

“There is no reason to involve the lady in this,” Thayne said. “She is naught but an innocent bystander.”

Balcorn’s smile broadened. “But such a lovely one,” he said. “I don’t think I could bear to be parted from her now.”

As Thayne’s lips thinned, Balcorn laughed. “Did you think I would not recognize Richard’s sister? I have made it my business to investigate his family in great detail recently. The other sister is prettier, but I’m not repining. I daresay Richard loves them equally and will be just as willing to hand over the original ciphers for one girl as he would for the other.”

Beatrice had been working very hard to school her features to impassivity, but she could not prevent the flare of hatred that ignited in her eyes. That an Englishman, a man who was serving in his country’s military, should plot against his own homeland was of all things despicable. She pressed the fingers of her left hand to her lips lest her mouth open of its own volition and spew forth the denouncements that were trembling on the tip of her tongue. But she realized that for once in her life, she must control her impulses. To do less would be to lower herself to this man’s level.

That Thayne recognized her internal struggle seemed apparent when he reached for her right hand—which she had clenched into a fist at her side—and gave it a swift squeeze of encouragement. Startled, Beatrice glanced toward him and was rewarded with a brief wink. What was he thinking, Beatrice wondered. Was he as calm as he appeared, or was he trembling inside like she was? There was no time to decide. Almost immediately Thayne was again addressing Balcorn.

“When did you begin to suspect that we were intercepting your spy’s ciphers and that Richard was altering them before they were being forwarded on to France?”

Balcorn smirked, obviously pleased with himself. "Do you really suppose I am going to accommodate your curiosity by responding to your questions? Why should I?"

Thayne shrugged. "You are quite right. Why should you waste your time by supplying information I already possess?"

His smirk faded and Balcorn glared at Thayne for several seconds. "What do you think you know?"

Thayne merely raised his eyebrows before turning to stare out the window. The silence dragged on for several seconds before Balcorn spoke again.

"You do not know nearly as much as you think. I'm sure both you and Richard assumed he had been set upon by footpads when in reality we had decided to disable him, knowing he would be forced to request help. Frankly, I was a bit surprised when you were the first person he sent for, and—I must admit—a bit less than pleased. Kidnapping a peer is not an action that will go unnoticed, but as soon as Richard hands over this last batch of ciphers—which, incidentally, are the most important—you will be released and I and my friends will be leaving the country."

Thayne continued to stare out the window, appearing more interested in the passing hedgerows than in his companion's confessions.

"Nor, may I point out," Balcorn continued, "were either you or Richard aware that you were being watched. My men have been stationed in the street outside Richard's lodgings for the past two days, ready to notify me the moment someone appeared with the last batch of ciphers. Of course, Richard's sister was an unexpected bonus."

Thayne finally turned his head to stare directly into Balcorn's eyes. "Harm Miss Crowell," he said, his tone quite matter-of-fact, "and leaving the country will do you little good. There is no place on earth you would be safe from Richard's and my vengeance."

Beatrice gasped softly. She had been following the conversation with a good deal of interest, not only because it had supplied her with considerable information, but also because it revealed several of Thayne's characteristics she would never have suspected existed. Apparently he deserved every particle of the admiration her heart had insisted upon bestowing on him.

Balcorn chuckled at Thayne's threat, although Beatrice noticed he had tightened his grasp upon his weapon until his knuckles turned white. "Never fear, my lord," he said, his lip curling. "Miss Crowell will not be harmed—assuming she tries nothing stupid."

"She is not likely to do so," Thayne responded. "She is, after all, a very intelligent young woman."

“Thank you,” Beatrice spoke up, feeling inordinately pleased at Thayne’s words despite suspecting that he was merely trying to communicate to her the need to behave herself. Her suspicions were confirmed when Thayne did not even bother to glance in her direction, instead turning his attention back to the view outside the coach window.

By this time, they had left the city far behind. Traffic had thinned to an occasional lumbering farm cart or a post chaise hurrying toward its next stage.

After a few more moments of silence, Thayne again turned to address Balcorn. “I would prefer that you not run my team into the ground. If you wish to stop and change horses, I give you my word of honor that I shall not try to escape.”

“You need not worry about your team, my lord,” Balcorn replied, a bit haughtily, as though he felt somewhat insulted. “I’m as fond of horses as the next man. We aren’t going so far that they’ll be harmed.”

Beatrice fancied that Thayne’s tension increased with Balcorn’s reassurances, and she suspected she knew why. Thayne would have preferred that they stop at some posting inn to ease the way for anyone who might try to follow their trail. A carriage as ornate as Thayne’s coach would not go unremarked by any self-respecting ostler.

“You are very quiet, Miss Crowell,” Balcorn said, smiling at her broadly. “I had been given to understand that you are the twin with the most spirit. Are you so easily frightened speechless?”

Infuriated, Beatrice opened her mouth to inform her captor that she was not in the least intimidated by him, but Thayne forestalled her.

“You will kindly refrain from addressing Miss Crowell,” he said, his tone so menacing that Beatrice felt a shiver dart down her spine. “She is a lady and not accustomed to such treatment. The poor girl is no doubt struggling to maintain her composure as it is. Any more comments from you, and she will surely dissolve into a strong fit of hysterics.”

Beatrice glanced at Thayne, unsure whether he believed what he was saying or whether he was attempting to give her a cue. Although she could tell nothing from his expression, she assumed he wanted her to appear frightened. Suppressing a natural inclination to give Balcorn a scathing setdown, she instead bowed her head and gave her best imitation of cringing. Then, curiosity getting the better of her, she glanced up through her eyelashes to view Balcorn’s reactions.

He stared at her, a puzzled expression in his eyes. Finally, shrugging, he glanced at the view outside the coach windows. “Blast it

all,” he commented. “I believe we’re going to get some rain.”

“A storm more likely, it appears,” Thayne responded calmly. “The skies are growing uncommonly dark.”

Balcorn frowned and then shrugged. “Oh well, we aren’t far from our destination now. In fact, our turn is just a few feet away.”

As Balcorn spoke, the coach was slowing. Within seconds, they had left the main road behind and the carriage was bouncing along a deeply rutted lane. Beatrice flattened both her palms against the seat on either side of her, trying to brace herself, but the coach suddenly lurched to the right as the wheels plunged into an especially deep rut. Beatrice gasped aloud when she felt herself being thrown rather violently against Thayne. He absorbed the impact of her body without flinching, merely reaching to wrap one arm around her shoulders and pull her close to his side.

Beatrice had not realized how terrified she actually was until she found herself being cuddled in Thayne’s arms. Thayne was trying to protect her from the worst of the coach’s wild swaying, and she turned toward him, wrapping an arm around his waist. She could feel his heart beating beneath the fine fabric of his coat, and she relaxed against him, allowing herself the luxury of breathing in the clean and somehow comforting scent of his soap.

“Damnation, Captain,” Thayne snarled through clenched teeth. “Tell your coachman to slacken this wild pace before we are all killed.”

“You would like us to slow down, would you not, my lord?” Balcorn sneered. “Are you hoping that Richard Crowell is already on our trail? I can assure you that he is not. Now—”

A flash of lightning so close it illuminated the darkening skies was followed by a resounding boom of thunder. The coach seemed to stand still for a split second before suddenly lurching into even greater speed. The horses were bolting.

The next few moments were a nightmare of fleeting impressions for Beatrice. Had Thayne not been clutching her tightly against his chest, she was certain she would have been flung about the interior of the coach as it lunged wildly from side to side. She closed her eyes and then opened them again, startled by the realization that something was scraping noisily against the side of the coach. Tree limbs from the encroaching forest dragged across the windows, a blur of greenery against a darkened sky.

When the rain began, it was as though someone had dumped a huge barrel of water over them. It pounded against the roof of the coach, gradually increasing in intensity until Beatrice realized it had all but drowned out the sounds of her pounding heart. Even the

clamor of the rain, however, could not mask the next explosion of thunder, followed by the sound of a tree somewhere ahead of them splitting apart. The rustle of leaves brushing against leaves filled the air as the tree crashed toward the ground.

Beatrice screamed when the coach stopped so suddenly it skidded from side to side on the muddy roadway. She closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable crash, but immediately opened them again when she felt Thayne thrusting her away from his side. Bereft of his comforting embrace, Beatrice frantically looked about for the reason behind his desertion.

Balcorn, who had been thrown sideways in the seat, was striving to right himself, but in the meanwhile, the pistol he held in his right hand was pointed toward the ceiling of the coach. Thayne chose that moment to leap toward their captor. Beatrice had no doubt he would have succeeded in disarming Balcorn had the coach not begun to tilt sideways at the very moment he sprang. When Balcorn pulled the trigger, the motion of the overturning coach threw Thayne directly into the bullet's path.

Beatrice watched in horror as Thayne was thrown backward by the force of the bullet tearing into his left shoulder. Fighting the urge to close her eyes while the coach continued its seemingly endless listing to the side, Beatrice looked on in wide-eyed admiration as Thayne reached with his right hand to grasp the gun's barrel. Then, as the motion of the coach tossed Balcorn into the floor, Thayne brought the butt of the gun down hard on the back of the captain's head.

When the coach finally settled into place on the side of the road, Beatrice found herself lying facedown on top of Balcorn, with Thayne on top of her. Try as she might, she could not move even an inch, and she quickly realized that if Thayne had passed out, she was trapped between two unconscious men. Never had she been so glad to hear a human voice as when Thayne spoke softly into her ear.

"Would you kindly stop wriggling, Miss Crowell? I am sorry if I am crushing you, but I shall move as soon as I find something to grasp with my right hand so I can pull myself up. We may yet be able to escape if the coachman is kept busy for a few seconds with the horses or has been thrown off the coachbox and is himself injured."

Resisting the urge to nod her head, Beatrice lay very still. Thayne was heavy, and she experienced difficulty breathing as his weight pressed against her. She could feel him stretching above her and bit back a groan as his elbow gouged into her back. It was growing more and more difficult to pull breath into her lungs, and she realized she was near to passing out by the time she at last felt his body lift away from her.

Thayne was breathing heavily by this time, and Beatrice quickly lifted her head and attempted to look back to see how far he had progressed toward the coach door that was now facing the sky. The first thing that met her eyes was her own shoulder, now coated with Thayne's blood. Biting back a gasp of horror, Beatrice instead concentrated on trying to turn over. She realized she must be prepared to help herself as much as possible because Thayne's strength would surely be limited by his loss of blood.

By the time Thayne had managed to push the coach door open and turn back toward Beatrice, she was sitting up on Balcorn's back. "Shall I give you a push to help you through the door?" she asked.

Thayne didn't speak for a few seconds while he stared at Beatrice, a frown on his brow. "You're quite calm for a young lady of quality," he murmured. "And beautiful. You look beautiful right now."

Beatrice groaned softly. Apparently Thayne was already growing confused from loss of blood. She knew she couldn't look beautiful, especially now. Rain hurtled through the open coach door. The feather on her bonnet had wilted and was resting beside her nose, and her hair lay in damp strands against her cheeks. "Lord Thayne?" she said, keeping her voice as calm as possible. "Are you feeling faint?"

Thayne continued to stare at her. His face had paled, while blood from his wound was quickly coloring his shirt scarlet. "So composed," he murmured. "So lovely."

Beatrice's fears for Thayne increased. "Did you hear me, my lord?"

Thayne nodded slowly and his gaze appeared to sharpen. "Yes. Yes, I did, and I appreciate your offer, but I do not need you to push me out. I'll help you out first if you will give me your hand."

"An excellent idea," Beatrice replied, lifting her arm toward Thayne while heaving a silent sigh of relief. He appeared to have recovered from his confusion. "Then I can help you." She gasped when he grasped her wrist with bruising force and tugged. Within seconds, he had shoved her through the open doorway.

Although she tried to cling to the overturned coach, the rain had made it slippery, and she soon found herself sprawled in the muddy ditch. Biting back the unladylike words that instantly sprang to mind, she picked herself up out of the mud and turned back to help Thayne, only to find that he was already through the doorway and clambering down to stand beside her. Clutching his shoulder, he turned quickly toward the front of the carriage.

Thayne's team had halted before a giant elm that had fallen across the road in front of them. Unable to continue their runaway pace, the horses still stomped and plunged in their harnesses. The driver, who had been thrown into the road on the far side of the coach, was

already picking himself up. “Hey,” he yelled, catching sight of the two captives standing beside the overturned vehicle. He thrust his hand into his greatcoat and pulled out a pistol.

“Let’s go.” Thayne grasped Beatrice’s wrist. Bending low, he dashed toward the woodland, pulling her behind him. “Keep down,” he shouted.

Beatrice had just ducked when the bullet whistled over her head. She heard Thayne’s soft curse as he yanked her into the concealing vegetation.

Chapter Twelve

“Beatrice is in trouble,” Chloe announced suddenly. She had been sitting quietly beside Henrietta for the last half hour, staring out the window as Randson’s coachman guided the carriage beyond the bustling streets of London and onto the Portsmouth Road.

“No sense borrowing trouble, girl,” Henrietta said, reaching to pat Chloe rather awkwardly on the hand. “Your sister could even now be on her way back home.”

Chloe shook her head. “No. She is in trouble. I can feel it.”

“What kind of trouble? Can you tell?” Randson asked. Dressed in riding clothes with a greatcoat lying beside him on the seat, he sat across from the ladies, his back to the horses.

Chloe looked directly at Randson for the first time since she had stepped into his carriage. The knowledge that she had used his misdeeds as a weapon to force him to accommodate her desires had preyed on her conscience, making her so uncomfortable she had found herself unable even to glance at the man she loved. Now she looked directly into his eyes and managed a wan smile. Trust Randson, she thought, to accept that she would know when her twin was in trouble. He had always understood her better than anyone else in the world. Except for that one terrible exception in Bath. “I am experiencing difficulty in breathing,” she explained softly.

Randson paled. “Is it bad?” he asked, ignoring Henrietta’s glare of disapproval.

“No need to encourage the girl,” Henrietta said in a repressive tone. “She’s frightened and worried. Anyone could experience shortness of breath under such circumstances.”

Randson continued to ignore Henrietta, choosing instead to study Chloe’s ashen face. “Is it bad?” he repeated, leaning forward to observe her more closely. His tone, while calm, was also filled with concern.

Chloe shut her eyes and took a deep breath. When she exhaled, she also smiled in relief. “No. In fact, I am feeling much better now. Whatever was crushing Bea has been removed.”

Henrietta snorted, shaking her head in disbelief.

Sighing, Randson turned to meet Henrietta’s disapproving glare and quoted softly, “‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy’.”

Henrietta flushed deeply and then shrugged. “As you will,” she

said shortly, turning to stare out the window.

Chloe bit back a smile and regarded Randson with new respect. "Thank you," she murmured. Then she lowered her gaze. She had wanted so much to continue looking into his eyes, drinking in his concern and his regard. But she dare not. He had wronged her, and now she was using him. With such grievances between them, they could not go back to what had once been. Forcing all expression from her face and from her tone, Chloe looked at Randson again and asked, "Do you have any idea where Beatrice and Lord Thayne are being taken?"

Randson sighed. "Unfortunately, no. The only fact of which I am certain is that Thayne's coach was seen taking the Portsmouth Road. I've instructed the coachman to stop at every inn along the way so I can make inquiries, but there is no guarantee we can pick up their trail."

"Looks like there's been a bad storm around here lately," Henrietta cut in. "I can see the damage along the roadside."

Randson and Chloe quickly turned to look out the coach windows. Indeed, as Henrietta had said, there was evidence that a strong storm had passed that way. The grain that had been growing in a nearby field now lay flat against the ground, while small limbs and leaves were scattered across the roadway.

Randson immediately signaled to his coachman to pull up. "If you ladies will excuse me," he said, "I believe I should check on the condition of the road ahead." Within seconds, he had swung himself out of the coach and onto the stallion he had tied behind. Directing the coachman to wait, he cantered off down the road. Within five minutes, he was back. He dismounted and hurried to the coach window.

"Bad news," he told the ladies. "There is a village just around the bend where I learned that the road beyond is impassable for carriages at the moment. Uprooted trees are blocking not only the Portsmouth Road but several of the side roads as well. I have bespoken rooms at a small inn for us. You ladies should be able to wait there in comfort while I ride ahead to see if I can locate Thayne's coach."

Although Chloe paled, she also nodded her head. There was no sense, she realized, in objecting to the inevitable.

Ten minutes later, after waving Randson on his way, Chloe and Henrietta were ushered into a tiny and ancient inn called the Fox and Kits. Both the innkeeper and his wife, who introduced themselves as Mr. and Mrs. Sweeney, appeared a bit flustered to be entertaining such fashionable ladies. Flashing her most charming smile, Chloe was trying to think of something to say to alleviate the couple's discomfort

when Henrietta forestalled her.

"I say now," she said, approval clear in her tone. "This is just the type of place I've been longing to visit. Very old. Very authentic. Shakespeare might have visited just such an inn in his day. The village is interesting too. Think I'll have a look around before going up to my chamber. You go on and rest for a while, Chloe. You have been under a bit of a strain lately."

Chloe glanced at the now-beaming innkeeper and his wife and flashed Henrietta an appreciative smile. Henrietta did not notice. She had already stepped into the common room and had begun inspecting the low-beamed ceiling. "Very old," she could be heard muttering. "Almost medieval, in fact."

Seeing that Henrietta was happily occupied for the time being, Chloe allowed the innkeeper's wife to escort her upstairs to a tiny but spotless chamber. Lady Henrietta, Mrs. Sweeney explained, would be housed in the room next door.

After attempting for over an hour to rest, Chloe gave up the effort. The disturbing sense of disquiet she was experiencing told her quite clearly that while Beatrice was no longer in physical danger, she was still under tremendous stress. Feeling the need for some company to keep her from dwelling on her twin's predicament, Chloe descended the narrow staircase in search of Henrietta.

The Fox and Kits at this midafternoon hour was quiet and dark and cool. Chloe looked about for some sign of life but found no one in the common room or in either of the two small parlors that looked out on the inn's side yard. Wandering over to an open window, Chloe stared for long seconds into the fluttering leaves of the massive ash just outside. The smell of wet earth and rain-freshened air wafted through the window on the afternoon breeze, bringing Chloe a measure of peace. It was almost, she realized, as though the elements were telling her to cease her worrying and that for the moment, Beatrice was all right. Smiling with relief, Chloe turned and went in search of Lady Henrietta.

She found Mrs. Sweeney first, but only after following her nose toward the delicious smells emanating from the rear of the structure. A bustle of activity stilled as Chloe hesitantly pushed open the door and stepped into the kitchen. Mrs. Sweeney and her two helpers turned quickly.

"There now," Mrs. Sweeney cried, wiping her flour-covered hands on a voluminous apron and hurrying toward Chloe. "Ye must forgive us, m'lady, but we're that shorthanded today. Mr. Sweeney, along with our pot boy, has gone out to help clear the roads. I was just baking some nice scones for yer tea. We could serve it to ye in the

front parlor in about ten minutes if that meets with yer approval.”

Chloe smiled shyly. “I do not wish to cause you undue trouble, Mrs. Sweeney,” she said. “I was merely looking for my companion, Lady Henrietta. Have you seen her?”

“Not since she said she was going to have a look at the village church, and that was nigh on an hour ago,” Mrs. Sweeney responded, frowning slightly. “I reckon I’m as fond of the church as the next person, but I can’t understand how a body could spend more than ten minutes looking at it. It’s not that big, as churches go.”

“Perhaps she decided to wander about the village for a while,” Chloe suggested. Then, licking her lips, “My, but those scones smell good. I wonder if I might be allowed to watch you prepare them. Our own cook has never had much success with scones and would no doubt appreciate my being able to pass along a few suggestions.”

Mrs. Sweeney glowed with pride. “Well, if I do say so myself, my scones are considered some of the best hereabouts. I’d be pleased to have ye watch, m’lady.”

For the next hour, Chloe managed to keep her nerves from flying to pieces by lingering in the kitchen, watching Mrs. Sweeney make scones and cajoling her hostess into serving tea at the kitchen table. Still, she listened every second for Randson’s return, and when she detected the sound of horse hooves clomping into the stable yard, she jumped up, glanced out the kitchen window to be sure it was Randson’s horse she heard, then dashed to the front door to meet him.

Five minutes later, he stepped inside and Chloe knew instantly from his solemn expression that he had not found Beatrice and Lord Thayne. He looked at Chloe and shook his head.

“No sign of our friends,” he said. “However, the tree blocking the road has been removed. We can continue on our way as soon as you wish.”

Chloe breathed a soft sigh of relief. Her sense of unease had returned during the last half hour. “Yes, I would like that, but we must locate Lady Henrietta first. She decided to explore the village while I rested.”

“Shouldn’t be difficult to find her,” Randson said. “It’s a small village, after all.”

Thirty minutes later, Chloe and Randson had visited the village’s church, five small shops and even the local tavern. Inquiries of everyone they met elicited the same response. No one could recall having seen a strange lady dressed in a chocolate brown traveling gown with a bonnet sporting two curling ostrich plumes.

“We had best go back to the church and see if we can locate the vicar,” Randson suggested at last. “If Lady Henrietta went there first,

perhaps she shared her plans with him.”

The church was still empty, but a passerby was able to direct Randson and Chloe to the vicar’s residence, only a short distance down a rock-paved pathway. The vicar’s housekeeper was of no help. She had not seen that gentleman since he had left for the church early that morning. He had not even come home for his usual cup of tea, she complained.

Randson gave Chloe a smile that he obviously intended to be encouraging. “No doubt our quarry has by now returned to the inn and is wondering where we are. That’s the only place we have not looked in the past forty-five minutes.”

Chloe forced a smile. She did not want Randson to guess the depth of her unease, which increased with each passing moment. There was, after all, nothing they could do until they located Henrietta. “Yes,” she said. “Let us return to the Fox and Kits.”

But Henrietta was not at the inn. Randson and Chloe accepted Mrs. Sweeney’s offer of tea while they waited, but neither finished even one cup. Chloe was growing increasingly nervous and started each time the soft breeze stirred the muslin curtains at the parlor window. Anxiety about Henrietta’s welfare was added to her deep apprehensions about her twin.

When Henrietta hurried into the parlor some half hour later, she looked as though she had volunteered to serve as someone’s dust mop. Her dark brown dress was splotted in numerous places with large patches of dust, and her ostrich plumes, now broken and dangling rather pathetically to one side, were covered with cobwebs.

“The most wonderful thing has happened,” Henrietta called out, smiling happily at Randson and Chloe, who had instantly jumped to their feet.

“We’ve been looking for you,” Randson told Henrietta with a touch of reproof in his voice. “But what do you mean by saying something wonderful has happened? Have you found Thayne and Miss Beatrice?”

“No, but, oh you would never guess,” Henrietta continued, a wide grin on her face. “The possibility of an unpublished Shakespearean play. Right here in this village. When I visited the church, the vicar and I began talking about Shakespeare, and Mr. Phillips showed me a few pages he discovered in the attic where the old church records are stored. He believes my dearest Will was once stranded in this village and wrote a play while here. No one can even guess why it was left behind, but Mr. Phillips is certain he has found a few pages and that the rest of the play is somewhere in the attic. I dashed back here to get a bite to eat before returning to the church.”

Chloe stared at her chaperone in dismay. "But Lady Henrietta, Lord Randson says the roads are clear. We were waiting for you to return before continuing our search for Beatrice and the marquess."

Henrietta shook her head. "I cannot go with you, girl. Do you not understand? An unpublished play by Shakespeare! Think what that would mean to the world. No, I cannot go."

"But Lady Henrietta," Randson began, stepping forward. "You could always return later, after we're located our friends."

"No, no," Henrietta said, shaking her head even more vigorously. A tattered ostrich plume lost its fragile hold on her bonnet and slowly drifted to the floor. "This cannot wait. Why, this very afternoon, a tree downed by lightning missed the church by only a few feet. Had it destroyed the church, that play would be lost forever. No, I cannot risk leaving. Chloe, you must allow Randson to go on alone. You would be of no help to him anyway."

Chloe gazed into Henrietta's glittering eyes and understood that nothing she could say would change the lady's mind. Henrietta was so determined to pursue her goal that she would never be swayed by simple logic.

Aware that she had no other choice, Chloe had opened her mouth to say she would remain with Henrietta when the pain struck. Only by clamping her lips tightly together and gritting her teeth was she able to keep from screaming as the agony tore through her head.

"You'll have to stay, Chloe," Randson said. He too had recognized the futility of arguing with Henrietta.

Chloe moved her head from side to side. The pain intensified and her surroundings grew dim.

"You must see that we can't travel alone, Chloe," Randson said, frowning when Chloe continued to shake her head.

The pain began to ease, leaving behind a fear greater than any Chloe had ever known. Beatrice was somewhere ahead of them, and she was in deep peril. "I'm going with you," she said firmly.

Randson sighed. "Be sensible, Chloe. It will be dark in two hours. We would have to spend the night at an inn. Should anyone ever know, the only thing that would save your reputation would be marriage to me."

Chloe knew Randson was right. It would be foolish of her to continue insisting that she be allowed to accompany him when she had no chaperone. But she was positive of two things—one, that Beatrice was in trouble and two, that Beatrice would let nothing stand in her way should Chloe be the twin who was in danger.

She lowered her brows and glared at Randson. "Thank you for the warning, my lord, but I would even risk marriage to you in order to

find my sister.”

Randson’s eyes widened and his face flushed. Then he squared his shoulders. “I see. In that case, let us proceed.” He held a rigid arm out to her.

Chloe had never seen Randson this angry before. Fury seemed to emanate from him in waves so hot she feared her face must be close to catching on fire. But she was determined not to back down. “Yes, we must go,” she said, reaching up to lay a trembling hand on Randson’s arm.

Neither spoke again as she allowed him to lead her from the Fox and Kits and hand her into his carriage.

Chapter Thirteen

It was strange, Beatrice concluded, that her lungs could burn while her body shivered. Or did her tremors result from fear rather than the bone-chilling dampness of the deep forest? Thayne was weakening, and she was terrified for him.

He had certainly been strong enough when they first dashed into the woodland. Using his body to shield her, he had forged a path through the undergrowth, pulling her along behind him until she gasped for breath, until the pouring rain and the dripping foliage soaked her to the skin.

But now, despite the fact that he still clung tenaciously to her wrist, Thayne had begun to stagger and Beatrice feared for his life should they continue to run much longer.

“Lord Thayne,” she called softly. “Stop. Please.” When he ignored her, Beatrice dug in her heels and jerked on his hand. “Nicholas. We must stop a moment.”

Thayne turned to stare at Beatrice, a small frown of confusion furrowing his forehead, almost as though he had forgotten she was behind him. He did not loosen his grip on her hand. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “Have I run you into the ground?”

“I am totally exhausted,” Beatrice lied, puffing a bit more than was necessary. “I must have a few moments to catch my breath. Besides, I do not think we are being pursued any longer. Listen.”

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, and although it still pattered softly against the leaves above them, no other sound disturbed the silence of the forest.

Thayne glanced around quickly and then stepped behind a massive tree, pulling Beatrice with him. “I think we’ve lost our pursuer,” he whispered after a few seconds.

“Apparently so,” Beatrice agreed. “Now I must see about binding up your wound. Sit down, please.”

Thayne turned to stare at her. “What do you know about dressing wounds?”

“Enough to realize that if we do not slow the bleeding, you are going to die.” Beatrice hoped she had managed a tone that was convincingly authoritative despite the weakness that had suddenly settled in her knees. After all, she reminded herself sternly, she was accustomed to dealing with responsibilities. She had spent most of her adult years compensating for Chloe’s absentmindedness, taking on the

housekeeping chores her mother could no longer oversee, and watching after the manor during her father's periodic excursions to search for new methods to relieve his wife's pain. But not once had she been called upon to treat a gunshot wound. She feared her uncertainty was written clearly on her face.

"You can make a pad from my handkerchief and secure it with my cravat," Thayne said, his mouth quirked in a half smile. "The problem will be getting me out of this coat. I am not at all sure I can move my arm."

Beatrice stifled a sigh of relief. Thank goodness Thayne appeared to know what she should do. "I can slit your sleeve," she offered, opening her reticule and pulling out a small pair of scissors. "That should help. Sit down, please. There's an uprooted tree just behind you."

Thayne glanced back at the fallen tree and then turned to look deep into Beatrice's eyes. "You are a most inventive young lady, Bea," he said with that same teasing half smile.

Beatrice was amazed to feel her heart speeding up again. It had just begun to slow from their precipitous flight through the woods. She moistened her lips. "Bea?" she repeated.

Thayne smiled fully. "You called me Nicholas a moment ago. Surely that gives me the right to use your given name."

"Did I?" Beatrice asked, swallowing painfully. "I didn't...that is, I don't recall." It seemed unfair somehow that he could look more handsome than ever with his hair plastered flat by the rain. Beatrice dreaded to think what sort of bedraggled wretch she must resemble.

"I like the sound of my name on your lips," Thayne said, his tone soft but solemn. He lifted his right hand and gently touched her cheek with the back of one finger.

Beatrice suppressed a longing to cover his hand with her own and pull it closer. Instead she gave herself a mental shake. The man had lost a great deal of blood. No doubt he was on the verge of passing out. There was no other way to explain this sudden lover-like behavior. "Sit down," she ordered, compressing her lips into a firm line. "We are wasting time."

After a slight grimace and quickly elevated eyebrows, Thayne obeyed.

Ten minutes later, Beatrice had attained a clumsy but seemingly adequate bandage that appeared to be slowing the rate of Thayne's bleeding. Despite being as gentle as possible, she had been aware that her ministrations had hurt Thayne rather badly. His pallor had grown more pronounced by the minute.

Beatrice felt less than steady herself. Her task had been nerve-

racking, but she had tried very hard to pretend that she was unafraid. Now she must continue to be strong. Taking a deep breath, she looked directly into Thayne's eyes. "You are too weak to travel any further. I will go on alone and return with help."

"Absolutely not," Thayne responded instantly, pushing himself to his feet. He was still pale, but he at least was not swaying. "We cannot afford to be separated."

Beatrice opened her mouth to argue and then closed it again. He was right, after all. She was not certain, should she leave him here, that she could find her way back again, and she could not bear the thoughts of him dying alone in this damp and increasingly chilly forest. "Very well," she agreed. "But please do not hesitate to lean upon me should you grow weak. I am very strong, you know."

"Yes, and I appreciate that fact more than you will ever know."

Beatrice was certain she detected a laugh in Thayne's voice. She glanced up at him quickly and as quickly lowered her gaze, embarrassed by the admiration that was written clearly in his twinkling eyes.

"Shall we go?" he asked, offering Beatrice his arm as though they were merely venturing from the drawing room to the dining room.

Smiling in response, Beatrice laid her fingers on his wet sleeve and stepped off beside him into the darkening forest.

Twenty minutes later, they appeared to have made little progress. The trees were becoming denser than before and Beatrice feared that rather than finding their way out of the forest, she and Thayne were venturing further and further into its depths. She glanced at Thayne from the corner of her eye and noted that his face had again turned ashen.

"May we please rest for a few minutes, Lord Thayne?" she asked, forcing her shoulders to slump. "I am extremely tired."

"Little liar," he murmured fondly, but he at least stopped walking. "What happened to Nicholas? I told you that I like the sound of my name on your lips."

Beatrice pretended not to hear him. "Are you thirsty, my lord? I see a brook just through that stand of trees, and I would be pleased to fetch a drink for you. I have a small cup in my reticule."

"What else do you carry in that thing?" Thayne asked, just before dropping onto a nearby stump. He immediately jumped up. "Look," he yelled.

Startled, Beatrice spun around, fully expecting to encounter nothing less than a poisonous viper or an enraged boar. Her eyes frantically scanned the trees and bushes surrounding them, but she could detect nothing out of the ordinary. "What is it?" she asked, her

heart in her throat.

“A stump,” Thayne explained, pointing.

“A stump?” Beatrice stared at him, her eyes wide with concern. Obviously Thayne’s mind had started wandering. What was she to do now?

“Don’t you understand? Someone has cut down a tree here. And not long ago, from the looks of it. And judging by the color, that’s fresh sawdust on the ground. That means we are not far from civilization.”

“Does it?” Beatrice asked. Weak from fright and worry, she sank down on a nearby log. She could not share Thayne’s elation about his discovery. Even if he was right, she had no idea in which direction civilization lay.

Thayne grinned, albeit weakly. “Such unbounded enthusiasm! But never fear, my dear, we shall soon find help.”

“Yes, my lord,” Beatrice replied, returning his grin. His optimism was contagious. Or did her euphoria result from Thayne’s referring to her as his dear? Beatrice gave herself another mental shake. She must not pay too much attention to Thayne’s actions or words when he was probably lightheaded from loss of blood. Perhaps, she reflected, what he was feeling was akin to the loss of perspective she had noted among men who had drunk too much port. Everyone knew that a man did not necessarily recall what he said when he was under the influence of strong drink.

“If you have rested enough, let us proceed, my dear,” Thayne said. Although he was holding out his arm for Beatrice to lean on, he was also weaving a bit. Beatrice slipped her arm through his. She realized she would soon be called upon to help him stand.

“Little Bea,” Thayne murmured after they had walked several yards in silence.

“Yes, my lord?”

“Nicholas, remember? But tell me, little Bea, what kind of bee are you? A bumblebee? No. I have it! A honeybee! You really are a honey, you know. A honey of a Bea. But without a stinger. No, that’s not quite true. You do have a stinger, but, but...”

Beatrice glanced up just as Thayne lost consciousness and slowly sank toward the ground. Without thinking, she jumped behind him, intending—foolishly, she realized later—to hold him up. Instead, he brought her down with him, propelling her backward as they fell. Beatrice never saw the low branch behind her, the branch that shuddered a bit as her head crashed into it. She was, however, aware of a momentary flash of near-blinding pain before the darkness became complete and she knew no more.

When Beatrice opened her eyes and looked up into green leaves dancing above her head, she couldn't recall for a few seconds where she was or why her head was pounding so terribly. Then she remembered. Suppressing a groan, she slowly sat up and looked around.

Thayne was stretched out on the ground beside her, his thigh pressing against her hip. For one terrible instant, Beatrice thought he was dead. Quickly bending close to his pale lips, she sighed with relief when she was able to ascertain that he still breathed, albeit shallowly.

A wet and curling lock of hair had fallen onto his brow, and Beatrice gently brushed it back, then sat staring at his sleeping face in wonderment. "Nicholas," she murmured tenderly, comforted by the sound of his name. The elegant marquess resembled nothing so much as a small boy resting after a long day of play. His lips curved into a soft smile and his lashes, long and dark, rested gently on his colorless cheeks.

But he was not asleep, Beatrice reminded herself. He was unconscious, and he needed help. It was up to her to find that help. Pushing herself to her feet, she closed her eyes and stood perfectly still for several seconds, waiting for her head to stop spinning and for the darkness to recede.

When she felt capable of turning her head without toppling over, Beatrice surveyed the area around her. There was nothing to differentiate this spot from a thousand others in the forest, and she feared that even after she had found someone to help her, she could never lead them back here again. Still, she had to try.

She began walking.

Five minutes later when she stepped out of the shade of the forest and into a sunlit field of grain, Beatrice felt like shouting her joy to the bright blue sky. Glancing around quickly, she was even more delighted to see a small stone house not more than half a mile away. Feeling more lighthearted by the moment, she set off walking toward the house.

Soon after her knock was answered, Beatrice was able to judge that Harry and Gertie Mellis were not accustomed to receiving company in the middle of the afternoon, especially when that company came in the form of an unkempt young woman with mud-covered slippers and a bloodstained bodice. Nevertheless, Gertie Mellis took one look at Beatrice's fashionable gown and sank into an awkward curtsy.

Harry Mellis, unfortunately, was less easily impressed than his wife. He frowned all the while when Beatrice told her tale of an

English gentleman who had been shot down by a spy for the French and lay unconscious in the forest.

"Where's this French spy now?" Harry demanded, his sunburned brow furrowed.

"Captain Balcorn isn't French. He is an Englishman and a traitor, and I suspect he is on his way out of the country." Beatrice kept her voice firm and looked Mr. Mellis directly in the eye. She was aware that her abbreviated story and her unconventional appearance were sufficient causes to create suspicion. She also knew she could not afford to fail in her efforts to convince this man of her honesty.

"The feller in the woods who's been shot. Is he your husband?" Harry asked, frowning more deeply.

"Of course he is my husband," Beatrice said instantly, raising her chin. "I told you we were alone in our coach when we were abducted." The farmer's attitude was not what she had expected and certainly not what she had hoped for. Thayne was lying in the woods, perhaps bleeding to death from a traitor's bullet, and Mr. Mellis seemed more interested in whether or not they were married. If he suspected they were not, Beatrice very much feared he would refuse to help her.

"I don't see ye wearing a wedding ring," Mr. Mellis noted, regarding Beatrice with narrowed eyes.

"The spy who shot my husband stole it," Beatrice responded without hesitation. "If you do not intend to help me, Mr. Mellis, perhaps you could at least drive me to the nearest magistrate."

"Can't do that," Harry Mellis said. "Too many trees down to get anywhere this afternoon. Be two or three days before all the roads are cleared."

Beatrice clamped her teeth together. She longed to scream but realized she must maintain control over her emotions if she was to save Thayne's life. "If it's money you want, Mr. Mellis..." she began, only to pause when Gertie Mellis stepped forward.

"Now see here, Harry Mellis," Gertie said, glaring at her husband, her plump hands propped upon her ample waist. "Ye claim to be a Christian man, but give ye an opportunity to perform an act of Christian charity and what do ye do? Ye begin hedging and asking questions and—"

"I'm not hedging," Harry cut in, obviously determined to defend himself. "But I'm not against a little caution when caution seems called for. How do we know this lady and her husband aren't French spies?"

"Harry! Does this lady sound French to you?"

"Not having had conversation with any Frenchies, I wouldn't

know. Maybe—”

“Please!” Beatrice interrupted. “I swear to you I am not French, nor is my husband. But if he does not get help soon, he is going to die.”

Beatrice looked into Mr. Mellis’s eyes and realized that his suspicions were as strong as ever. She gritted her teeth, praying for help in convincing the man of her veracity. And for the strength to continue arguing with him. Her head ached dreadfully, she was worried sick about Thayne, and now it appeared that she was going to accomplish nothing beyond promoting an increasingly acrimonious argument between Farmer Mellis and his wife. Frustration, fear, and anger combined to induce in Beatrice a weakness to which she rarely succumbed. Huge tears began rolling down her cheeks.

“Now see what ye’ve done, Harry Mellis,” the farmer’s wife said, glaring at her husband as she stepped forward to wrap a comforting arm around Beatrice. Mrs. Mellis smelled of cinnamon and ginger, and Beatrice was delighted to rest her head against that sturdy shoulder.

“I haven’t done anything,” Harry objected, his ruddy face turning even redder.

“No, nor likely to do so from the looks of it.” Mrs. Mellis patted Beatrice on the shoulder while subjecting her husband to a severe frown.

“All right,” Mr. Mellis said, throwing his hands up in surrender. “I’ll fetch Jamie from the barn. We’ll go to the woods and carry the gentleman back. But don’t go blaming me if we’re attacked by a regiment of French soldiers.”

Beatrice blinked her eyes. She had no idea how a regiment of French soldiers had become a part of Mr. Mellis’s fears, nor did she wish to take time to investigate that small mystery. “I’ll show you the way,” she said quickly. “It isn’t far.”

“No need,” Mr. Mellis responded sullenly. “Our boy and me can follow yer tracks.” He turned and stomped off toward the barn.

Beatrice would have objected, fearing the men might lose her trail in the rain-washed forest, but Gertie Mellis nodded her head. “Harry’s right,” she said. “Him and Jamie can manage just fine. And while they’re gone, you can help me get the spare bedroom ready for your poor husband.”

“Very well,” Beatrice agreed reluctantly, pleased not to be facing that trek back through the muddy field, yet concerned lest these strange men be less than gentle with Thayne.

“They’ll be easy with him,” Gertie assured Beatrice, an understanding smile brightening her chubby face. “Don’t you worry, Mrs... Now isn’t that something? I don’t even know your name.”

Beatrice gulped. Of course she had heard Thayne's family name at some time in the past, but she could not for the life of her recall what it was. His title would have to do. "Thayne," she murmured.

"Mrs. Thayne," Gertie repeated, grasping Beatrice's cold hand. "Now then, child, don't you worry so. I'm known in these parts for my remedies, and I promise you that your husband would get no better care if he was in the hands of one of them fancy London physicians."

"I'm sure," Beatrice murmured. She was beginning to wish she had not claimed that she and Thayne were married. But it was too late to change her story now. Mrs. Mellis might not feel so kindly toward her if she learned Beatrice had lied about her marital status. Why was she forever getting herself into trouble because of her unruly tongue?

"Just step this way, Mrs. Thayne," Gertie Mellis said, leading Beatrice into the small but tidy house. A narrow set of stairs hugged one wall opposite a hallway leading toward the kitchen area. The smell of baking bread set Beatrice's mouth to watering, reminding her that she had skipped breakfast that morning.

"The spare bedchamber is upstairs," Mrs. Mellis continued. "It's not big, but it faces away from the barn and gets a breeze from the east. There's a nice large bed in the room, plenty big enough for a couple. I think you and Mr. Thayne will be real comfortable there."

Chapter Fourteen

Chloe was feeling better—at least about Beatrice's welfare. After all, the pain that had left her so shaken her in the parlor of the Fox and Kits had now diminished to a minor headache, and the anxiety that had caused her so much concern earlier that afternoon had eased considerably. About her own situation, Chloe was much less tranquil.

Lord Randson was furious with her, and she didn't blame him. She wanted to apologize, but he had chosen to ride his stallion rather than sit in the coach, apparently preferring his own company to hers, even when a sudden rain shower blew up and soaked him to the skin.

In fact, he had not spoken to her at all since they left the Fox and Kits except on the occasions when he stopped at an inn or tollgate to ask about Thayne's coach. Then he would ride back to share with Chloe his lack of news, but he did so in a tone so cold and distant, she could only nod her head. Despite her need to apologize, Chloe knew she could never get the words past the lump in her throat while Randson was still so angry with her. Sighing, she gnawed on her thumbnail and wished, as she had so often in the past, that she could be more like her sister. Beatrice never allowed herself to be intimidated by anger.

But Chloe was well aware of her own shortcomings. She knew she lacked her sister's courage and practical good sense. How Chloe envied her twin. She smiled wryly to herself, recalling how most people appeared to believe she was the luckier of the two. But Chloe had never felt lucky. She had just felt lonely. Not even her own family, despite their best efforts, had ever understood her love for the written word.

Then she had been introduced to Lord Randson in Bath. At first she had judged him to be like all the other gentlemen she had met, interested only in her beauty, and so she had begun spouting quotations at him. That particular tactic had always succeeded in discouraging her suitors, who would walk away shaking their heads sadly because such a lovely girl was also a bluestocking. But Randson had grinned with pure delight and immediately topped her quotations. Chloe fell in love with him on the spot.

She was still in love with him. Despite his mistrust, despite his lies, she still loved him. Now she had hurt him, and she did not know how she would ever find the courage to face his anger and explain. If only Beatrice were here.

“Chloe?”

Chloe almost jumped out of her seat. She had been so engrossed in her thoughts, she was not aware that the coach had stopped in front of a small inn and that Randson had opened the carriage door.

“Chloe! Are you all right?” Randson was still frowning as he had been all afternoon, but now his concern for her was evident in his tone.

Chloe forced a smile. “Yes, thank you, I am fine. Why are we stopping?”

Randson’s concern appeared to evaporate. When he spoke again, his tone was excessively polite. “We will be putting up here for the evening. I would have preferred going further because there is still an hour of daylight left, but the next inn is nearly fifteen miles away. If you would like to step down, I shall inquire about overnight accommodations for us.”

Chloe drew further back into the shadows of the coach as she felt her face growing warm. She had not fully realized until now how embarrassing this situation was likely to be. She and Randson would be spending the night alone—a circumstance that would horrify her parents and ruin her reputation should it ever become known. Pulling her bonnet down in an effort to cover as much of her face as possible, Chloe edged toward the open door.

Ten minutes later, she was blushing more deeply than ever. Although the solemn innkeeper had not questioned Randson’s request for separate rooms—one for himself and one for his sister—Chloe realized the man was watching her out of the corners of his eyes. She dropped her gaze to the floor. What would she do if the innkeeper remarked on the differences in her and Randson’s appearances or inquired as to why she was traveling without her maid?

Thankfully, the man merely shrugged and turned to bellow for his wife, who came hurrying from the back of the inn. Mrs. Davis was much more amiable than her husband. Her dark eyes sparkled with appreciation of Chloe’s beauty, and her ruddy face was brightened by a wide smile.

“Now then, m’lady,” Mrs. Davis said, “you just follow me and I’ll show ye to yer room. Ye’ll be wanting a nice rest before ye eat. In fact, I’ll—”

“I’ll be damned! If it isn’t my old friend, the Earl of Randson.”

Chloe stifled a moan and ducked her head as a strange gentleman entered the inn and rushed up to Randson’s side. His jovial voice filled the small entrance hall. “I thought you were settled in Town for the Season, old man. What are you doing on the Portsmouth Road? Take my word for it—nothing exciting going on in this direction! I should

know. Been visiting one of my uncles for a month. Blasted dull, I can tell you. And who have we here? I say, old man, your taste in ladybirds is improving. May I beg an introduction?"

Horried, Chloe glanced up into Randson's face and flinched. That he was struggling to control his rage was evidenced by the muscle twitching in his jaw. But he was smiling as he turned to face the newcomer. He also, Chloe realized from the slightly vacuous look in his eyes, had assumed the absentminded mask he sometimes affected in order to hide his emotions.

"Harold Tweeksby! Hello, old boy. Visiting an uncle, you say? Must be the one who's richer than Croesus to lure you from Town during the Season. Beastly weather we're having, don't you think? What say I buy you a mug of ale and you can tell me what you've been doing with yourself?"

Chloe bit back a gasp of surprise as she felt Randson's hand on the center of her back, giving her an ungentle nudge toward the innkeeper's wife, who stood by, waiting to show her to her room. Ducking her head, Chloe made a dash toward Mrs. Davis, only to feel a hand grab onto her arm. She was jerked backward with no small degree of force, landing against a gentleman's chest that was clad in an unusually garish waistcoat. Chloe was still blinking at the puce and purple stripes when she felt Randson grip her shoulders and pull her backward against him.

"I'll thank you to keep your hands off my sister, Tweeksby," Randson said, his voice frigid.

"Not good *ton*, Randson," Harold Tweeksby said with a sneer, "trying to pass a bit of muslin off as your sister. I happen to know you don't have a sister."

With a muffled curse, Randson pushed Chloe aside and stepped up to land a crushing right to Tweeksby's jaw. The dandy crashed to the floor and lay there unmoving.

"Here now," the innkeeper shouted, rushing forward to confront Randson. He stepped back quickly when he noticed that Randson's fists were still clenched, but his air of determination did not diminish. "I'm not having no brawling in my inn. You just take yourself and your sister—or whatever she is—and find yourself another place to put up for the night."

"Gladly," Randson said through his teeth, returning the innkeeper's glare. "I have no desire to stay where I am expected to see my sister insulted and do nothing to protect her honor." He reached to grasp Chloe's hand. "Come, my dear. I am sure we can find more congenial accommodations."

Three minutes later, Chloe found herself bundled back into the

coach. She had not dared object when Randson ordered the coachman to turn around and head back toward the Fox and Kits. Thankful that Randson had chosen to ride outside again, she sank back onto the soft squabs, trying to control her trembling. Now she had really created problems for poor Randson, not to mention herself. She had never met Harold Tweeksby, but she was aware that he was considered one of the leading dandies in London—and one of the most prolific gossips. There was no hope that he would not soon learn her identity and spread the story abroad of what he had seen on the Portsmouth Road.

Pressing a hand against her mouth to suppress a strong desire to scream, Chloe took a deep breath and then squared her shoulders. She must face the consequences of her actions. Randson would feel obligated to marry her now, but she could never agree to marry any man, especially Randson, because of a sense of obligation on his part. On the other hand, she was not at all sure she possessed the courage to refuse him and face his and her parents' anger, not without Beatrice beside her. Thus, she would have to use the sole weapon at her disposal—her intelligence—and figure out a way to live the rest of her life in disgrace and without the man she loved.

“Miss Chloe, may I request the honor of your hand in marriage?”

They had been traveling for nearly an hour back toward the Fox and Kits when Randson had asked Chloe's permission to join her inside the coach. With a forced smile, she had said she would be pleased to have him join her. His first words after sitting down across from her had been a proposal of marriage.

“Thank you, my lord,” Chloe responded, pleased that she could sound so calm when she was trembling inside. “But should you not speak to my father first?”

Randson glanced at her, frowning, his consternation clear in the dusky light. “Under usual circumstances, I would agree. And of course I shall see your father as soon as possible. But I want you to understand that I am not asking for your hand merely because of what happened today. My regard for you goes back many months, as I hope you realize. I regret, however, the necessity of our marriage if you have found it impossible to forgive me for my conduct in Bath.”

“Of course I have forgiven you, my lord.” Chloe actually managed a smile for the man she loved and had no intentions of marrying. “However, I will not marry you.”

“But C-C-Chloe,” Randson stammered. “You must. What I mean to say is, well, your reputation. That blasted Tweeksby cannot be depended upon to keep this to himself, especially after I lost my head and knocked him down. By the way, I wish to apologize for subjecting

you to that display of violence. I should not have—”

Chloe interrupted Randson by leaning across the space between them and patting him on the hand. “Frankly, I enjoyed seeing Tweeksby floored. And stop gaping at me. I know a bit of boxing cant. After all, I do have an older brother, you know.”

“Blast it all, Chloe. You’re trying to change the subject. We were talking about you marrying me. Why won’t you?”

Chloe lifted her chin. “I do not believe I am required to tell you why I cannot accept your suit.”

“Why not?”

“Why not what?” Chloe frowned in confusion.

“Why will you not tell me why you won’t marry me?”

Chloe bit her lip. She had not realized that Randson would be so persistent. “I do not wish to say.”

“Why not?”

Chloe opened her eyes a bit wider to stare across the space separating them. She wanted a better look at his expression to judge whether he was serious. He certainly appeared to be. “Why not what?” she asked again on a sigh.

“Why do you not wish to say why you will not tell me why you will not marry me?”

“My lord, this conversation is growing ridiculous. I refuse to sit here asking ‘Why not what?’ all afternoon. Now could we please change the subject?”

“Certainly. I love you, you know.”

“I still refuse to marry you.”

“Why?”

“Look, I think I see an inn ahead. Yes, I do believe we are approaching the Fox and Kits. Before we arrive, my lord, I want you to know that I very much appreciate all you have done for me today, including your kind proposal of marriage.”

“There was nothing kind about it, Chloe. That’s the problem, isn’t it? You think I’m being kind. Well, I’m not. I am sincere. I really want to marry you.”

Chloe smiled sadly and shook her head. “But I do not wish to marry you, my lord. And please do not worry about me. I shall be perfectly... Look! I believe that is Richard coming out to meet the coach. I knew he wouldn’t allow a few injuries to keep him out of the fray, but I hope he has not endangered Beatrice and Lord Thayne by joining the search for them.”

Randson immediately leaned forward to look out the window. “You’re right. That is Richard. I hope he has good news concerning

your sister and Thayne.”

As soon as the coach slowed to a stop, Randson jumped down and then helped Chloe to alight. She immediately ran into her brother's embrace. “Richard! How wonderful to see you! What are you doing here? Do you have news of Beatrice? Is she safe?”

“One question at a time, love. Unfortunately, I have no news of Beatrice, although Thayne's coach has been located. First, however, perhaps you should tell me where you and Randson have been and why you have been traveling with him in the absence of a chaperone.”

Half an hour later, Chloe was seated with her brother and the Earl of Randson in the front parlor of the Fox and Kits waiting for the supper Mrs. Sweeney had promised to provide.

Mrs. Sweeney had welcomed Chloe back to the inn with a deep sigh of relief and a broad smile. Lady Henrietta, she informed Chloe in a disgusted aside, had stayed in the church attic with the vicar until late afternoon. Following that scandalous behavior, she had returned to the inn covered in dust, demanding a bath and a meal in her room. She had snapped at the girls who waited on her and then instructed them to awaken her at first light. Apparently, Mrs. Sweeney observed with a smirk, Lady Henrietta's search in the church attic had been unfruitful.

Richard too was less than pleased with Henrietta. “Some chaperone she turned out to be,” he grumbled upon hearing why Chloe and Randson had been traveling alone. Then he shrugged. “Still, apparently no harm was done. You two were together for only a few hours.”

Randson cleared his throat and opened his mouth to speak, but Chloe forestalled him. “Please, Richard, I shall scream if you do not tell me instantly why you are here and whether your presence is endangering Beatrice and the marquess. Lord Randson said you were being watched.”

“So I was, dear sister,” Richard replied with a grin. “But Captain Balcorn had not made allowances for Marshall, who was able to slip out, find the two men who were observing my actions and eventually turn them over to the proper authorities. First, however, he persuaded one of them to confide in him regarding Captain Balcorn's plans. Marshall is usually a mild-mannered fellow, but he was less than pleased to learn that Beatrice had been abducted. Marshall is very fond of Bea.”

“You mentioned that Thayne's coach has been located,” Randson prompted.

“Yes. Marshall and I found it a few miles from here, abandoned on a side road leading to a hedge tavern. A tree across the road had

obviously disrupted Captain Balcorn's plans. There were signs that two people had run into the woodland, while two more had continued on foot to the tavern. Marshall feels certain that Beatrice and Thayne escaped into the forest." Pausing, Richard glanced into Chloe's ashen face and decided not to mention the diluted trail of blood that had led him and Marshall deep into the woodland until it disappeared at a fallen tree.

"Thank heavens Bea and Lord Thayne escaped," Chloe whispered. Then, more strongly, "What is being done to locate them?"

"After Marshall and I brought Thayne's team back to the village, Marshall recruited several men to help him comb the forest. They are still out searching. I had intended to ride ahead in hopes of overtaking you and Randson. I'm just as well pleased that you returned on your own. Now I can join the search."

"But not before daylight, I would think," Randson said, nodding his head toward the window. "It will be completely dark within the half hour."

Chloe clasped a hand to her mouth, but Richard merely nodded. "I fear you are correct. Besides, Marshall and the villagers who have been helping him will need a good night's rest if we are to take up the search at first light tomorrow." He then looked into Chloe's horrified expression and affected a confident tone. "Of course, the searchers may well have found Beatrice and Thayne by now. And if not, there is no reason to believe the two of them are still lost in the forest. Perhaps they found someone to help them earlier in the afternoon, which would explain why they are proving so elusive."

"No doubt you are right," Randson agreed after a covert glance at Chloe. "Knowing Thayne as I do, I can assure you that he is taking excellent care of Beatrice."

"Absolutely," Richard said enthusiastically. "I agree with your estimation of Thayne. We can all rest easy knowing Beatrice's safety is in his hands."

Chapter Fifteen

Thayne had been lying awake for five minutes trying to summon up the strength to open his eyes. Somehow he doubted it would be worth the effort, especially when the temptation was so great to lose himself again in the blissful forgetfulness of sleep.

Unfortunately, something nagged at the fringes of his memory. He very much feared he should be trying to stay awake, however much he disliked the idea. But he was so tired. And so weak. And in so much pain. That last realization brought with it a new determination. After all, if he was to figure out why he was in pain, he would have to open his eyes.

The light flickered, as though a lone candle somewhere in the chamber was about to sputter out, but the dim illumination was sufficient to convince Thayne that he was not in his own bedchamber. First of all, there were no bed-hangings—only a wooden ceiling above his head that looked not at all familiar. Nor did he recognize the white walls or the cheerful yellow curtains covering a small window.

“Where in Hades am I?” Thayne muttered to himself. Glancing down at the bedclothes, he again found nothing familiar. Instead of the satin counterpane to which he was accustomed, a handmade quilt covered him. Even the coarsely woven nightshirt in which he was clad was not his own.

The pain in his side was growing worse, spreading from his shoulder toward his stomach. With an effort, Thayne turned his head to the right and near gasped aloud with surprise. At last—something he recognized.

The sleeping woman was curled up in a large wooden rocking chair. A pillow cushioned her head, which lay against the back of the chair, and her feet were tucked up beneath her, hidden from view by a voluminous and rather garish dressing gown of scarlet cotton.

But what was Beatrice Crowell doing in his bedroom? And whose bedroom was he in? Frustrated with his inability to recall how he had gotten here, Thayne frowned in concentration, determined to reconstruct in his mind the events leading up to this unorthodox situation.

Memory came flooding back as his shoulder gave him another twinge. He had been shot. Now he remembered. He and Miss Crowell had been in his coach with Captain Balcorn, and he had been shot. He also recalled bleeding all over Miss Crowell, then dragging her behind

him through the forest as though she were naught but a rag doll and finally, apparently, passing out.

Thayne cringed as more memories returned. He had been babbling—there was no other word for it—to Miss Crowell. Something about her reminding him of a honeybee. Hardly a comment likely to impress a young lady.

But why had he wanted to impress her? Beatrice Crowell was in no way the type of woman who might appeal to him. She was not tall. She was not fair. She was not even sweet-tempered. During their brief acquaintance, she had frequently glared at him, sometimes ignored him and had once tossed lemonade in his face. So why should he wish to impress her?

With a silent sigh, Thayne admitted to himself that the reasons behind his feelings were less complex than he might have wished. He wanted to impress Beatrice Crowell because he found her to be such an impressive female. Not only was she the bravest young woman with whom he had ever been associated, but she was also the most resourceful. Obviously she had managed to find help for him after he passed out. Otherwise he would still be lying on the forest floor, probably dead.

No doubt about it. There was much to admire in Beatrice Crowell, which was fortunate because, after tonight, he would be forced to make her his marchioness. He just wished she resembled more closely the type of woman he had always envisioned marrying. He had not yet met that woman, of course, but he had carried her ideal in his heart for many years. She would be sweet-natured, with a charming and frequent smile. Never for any reason would she glare at him. She would always display a calm manner, with a hearty disdain toward impulsiveness. And most important of all, she would possess an innate sense of sophistication, never leaving herself open to ridicule, no matter what the situation.

Thayne's eyes widened as he watched the pillow cradling Beatrice's head fall onto the floor beside her chair. Seconds later, her head drooped downward toward her chest. Uncertain what a gentleman should do under such circumstances, he did nothing, merely watching as Beatrice nodded forward and then suddenly jerked her head backward. A grimace of pain crossed her face when her head came in contact with the wooden back of the chair, and her eyes opened.

Thayne continued to stare at Beatrice, hoping she would go back to sleep. He feared he was not up to an in-depth conversation at the moment. But he should have known she would never do what he wished her to do. With a small gasp of surprise, she uncurled herself and jumped to her feet. She instantly fell onto the floor.

“Miss Crowell! Are you all right?” Thayne tried to push himself erect in the bed. The stab of pain that accompanied his precipitous movement was so sharp he could not suppress a moan. Clenching his teeth, he tried again. And moaned again.

“Will you lie still, you silly man?” Beatrice hissed, scrambling awkwardly to her hands and knees. “I am perfectly all right.”

“Then why are you crawling about on the floor?”

Beatrice paused long enough to stand on her knees, giving her the height she needed in order to glare at Thayne. “Because my legs have gone to sleep, of course. They’ve been curled up under me for several hours now.”

“Perhaps you should have elected to sleep in a bed,” Thayne said with a scowl. He did not appreciate being called silly by a young miss who was crawling about on all fours. If anyone had ever looked silly, it was she. And now the chit was blushing to the roots of her mussed hair. What was wrong with her?

He watched her scramble awkwardly to her feet. Her bright red dressing gown reminded him of the blood—his blood—that had stained her pristine white muslin earlier in the day, and he felt instantly ashamed of himself. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “Obviously you have chosen to sit with me for a while. Where are we anyway?”

“In a farmhouse,” Beatrice answered shortly. “I’m supposed to give you some more medicine when you wake up. Just a moment and I’ll fetch it.” She started to turn.

“Wait,” Thayne called to her. “I don’t remember anything after passing out in the woods. What happened?”

Beatrice sighed and turned back to face him. For a second, Thayne thought he detected tears brightening her eyes, making them appear unusually large and shimmering. But no doubt their beauty and depth was a temporary illusion caused by the flickering candlelight.

He raised his brows. “If you will not tell me what happened, will you at least tell me whose farmhouse we are in?” he asked.

Beatrice blinked rapidly for a second, then straightened her shoulders. “I hardly think their names will mean anything to you, but our host and hostess are Mr. and Mrs. Mellis. Mrs. Mellis, fortunately, is very adept with medicines. She gave you a sleeping draught, removed the bullet and dressed your wound. She says you have lost a great deal of blood and will be weak for several days, but she assured me that her remedies will prevent you from coming down with a fever and that you should soon be fine.”

Thayne nodded his head slowly. “I hope she is correct about her remedies preventing fever, although I have never heard of such a thing.”

“Neither have I,” Beatrice said with a slight shrug, “but she swears it is so, and I find I believe her.”

“Then why are you sitting with me? Surely I could be left alone if I am in no danger?”

Thayne watched in some amazement as blood rushed to Beatrice’s cheeks so quickly that her face was soon as red as the dressing gown she wore. “Is there something you have not told me?” he asked. A knot of dread had formed in his belly.

Beatrice bit her lip before turning toward the small table beside the bed where she began fumbling with a glass and pitcher of water.

“Well?” Thayne demanded, aware that she was purposely avoiding looking him in the eye.

“There was no place else for me to sleep,” she responded at last.

Thayne sighed. His shoulder ached rather fiercely and his eyes continued to droop despite his best intentions to stay awake. No doubt he had Mrs. Mellis’s sleeping draught to thank for that. Nevertheless, he was determined to push Miss Crowell for answers to this strange situation in which he found himself. “But surely there was a sofa somewhere,” he said. “Or perhaps a pallet in another room?”

Beatrice cleared her throat, then turned back to face him. “Ah, yes, I suppose so, except for the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Mellis think I am...that is, they believe we are— Oh blast! They are under the impression that we are man and wife.”

“They what?” Thayne suddenly felt wide awake. “Where on earth did they get that idea?”

Beatrice grimaced. “It’s a little hard to explain.”

“Nevertheless, please try.” Thayne was aware that his tone sounded harsh, but his shoulder now felt as though it were on fire and his head had begun to ache almost as fiercely.

Beatrice gnawed on her lip a moment. “It’s a long story.”

“Oh very well,” Thayne said. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could stay awake, and he certainly didn’t have the strength to continue arguing with Beatrice. “You can relate the details later. I assume the important point is that the Mellises believe us to be man and wife, correct?”

“That’s correct,” Beatrice said. “Mr. and Mrs. Thayne, to be exact.”

“You gave my title as my surname?”

Beatrice lifted her chin. “How was I supposed to remember your surname? I was wet, muddy and sick with worry about you.”

“You’re right,” Thayne said. “And I apologize. Not that it matters anyway. I will be speaking to your father as soon as possible and will deem it an honor if you will agree to an early marriage.”

“Bah!” Beatrice said.

The Marquess of Thayne had not been on the town for the past several years without having been the prey of many a matchmaking mother or young debutante. He did not think himself a conceited man, but he would have been an idiot not to realize that he was considered one of the prizes on the marriage mart. After all, he was titled, wealthy and judged not bad looking.

And more than once he had been infatuated with one of the young misses who had thrown out lures to him. He had even, on a couple of occasions, envisioned himself proposing to a lady, and each time he had also envisioned her reply—a shy but sweet “Yes”. Never would he have imagined someone greeting his proposal of marriage with a “Bah!”

“What do you mean, ‘Bah’?” he demanded.

“I should think the implied meaning would be clear enough. However, I shall attempt to be more specific. It means I think that your proposal is ridiculously unnecessary and I will not marry you.”

“B-but you must,” Thayne stammered. “Do you not realize that it is night?”

“That fact had not escaped my attention. I have noticed that night has arrived every evening by this hour.”

Thayne closed his eyes, clamped his teeth together and took several deep breaths. Losing his temper would not help matters, he reminded himself, and he was too weak to strangle the silly chit. Did she understand nothing?

After a few more seconds passed, Thayne felt calm enough to try reasoning with the girl. Simultaneously, he opened his eyes and his mouth, only to find Beatrice bending over him. She had poked a spoon into his mouth before he realized what she intended to do.

The medicine tasted like something scraped off moldy bread and mixed with days-old coffee. Thayne feared he was going to gag, but Beatrice immediately lifted a glass to his lips. Thayne had not realized how thirsty he was until the cooling cider landed on his tongue. Then he drank deeply, and when he finished, he was so weak he fell backward onto his pillow.

“You need to sleep some more,” Beatrice informed him sternly. “Mrs. Mellis says that rest is extremely important. We can talk more in the morning.”

“We certainly shall,” Thayne said. Then he began carefully shifting himself toward the far side of the bed. “In the meanwhile, why don’t you share my accommodations? There’s plenty of room for both of us to rest quite comfortably without even touching. Besides, although I have never given the matter a great deal of thought, I

would assume that once a young woman's reputation is destroyed, it cannot be damaged to any greater degree."

Beatrice frowned to herself. Something about Thayne's reasoning did not ring true, but she was too tired to care. The day had been long and fatiguing, besides which, the back of her head was still extremely sore. Even with a pillow, she had experienced difficulty finding a comfortable position in that chair. She doubted she could ever have gone to sleep had she not been exhausted, and she was positive she could never sleep in the chair now.

"Very well," she murmured, only to discover that Thayne had not waited for her response. He was already snoring softly.

Moving with extreme caution, Beatrice snuffed the sputtering candle and slipped under the covers. The bed was not as accommodating as Thayne had indicated, and she found she could avoid touching him only by lying on her side on the very edge of the mattress. Still, the soft featherbed was much more comfortable than the chair and Beatrice was extremely tired. She felt herself drifting off to sleep in less than five minutes.

Dawn had brightened the room before Beatrice awoke again. She did not really wish to awaken. Never had she felt more comfortable. The bed was soft, the quilt covering her was snug and the man holding her in his arms was—

Beatrice stiffened. What was she doing in the center of the bed with the Marquess of Thayne's arm wrapped around her? Her head, she realized, was resting on his good shoulder and her hip was pressing against his thigh.

With a gasp of horror, Beatrice bolted upright and rolled off the bed. She looked back to discover Thayne was not only awake but was also grinning broadly.

"Good morning, Miss Crowell. Are you quite well? Your face is as red as that flaming dressing gown you wore to bed."

Beatrice gritted her teeth and glared at him.

"You really must learn not to glare at me quite so frequently, my dear," Thayne continued, a mischievous twinkle lighting his eyes. "You would not wish me to get the impression I am marrying a shrew."

"I do not wish you to get the impression you are marrying me at all, my lord," Beatrice said. "There is not the least need for us to marry. Mr. and Mrs. Mellis rarely mix with the *ton*. You need not fear that they will spread rumors."

"Actually, I was not concerned about our host and hostess. Their discretion—or lack of it—is the least of our worries. Or has it not

occurred to you that our sudden and simultaneous disappearances might have been noted by certain people in London, namely my mother and your sister?"

Beatrice lifted her chin. "I am certain an appropriate story can be circulated that will explain our absences, my lord. Besides, neither my sister nor your mother is likely to spread spurious tales about us."

Thayne instantly sobered. "True, but they will certainly have found it necessary by now to call upon others to help in the search for us. Thus, if I know anything about the *ton*, I can assure you that the tales, spurious or otherwise, are already circulating. I just hope our families are not worried to distraction about us. Is there some way we can send a message to London?"

"I tried yesterday," Beatrice replied, blowing out her breath in a sigh of exasperation and stepping back to sink down on the edge of the rocking chair. "Unfortunately, the Mellises possess neither a scrap of paper nor a drop of ink. However, they kindly offered to send their son, Jamie, into the nearest village to borrow some writing materials from the vicar."

"And?" Thayne prompted when Beatrice paused.

"It was most peculiar. Jamie was gone for much longer than his parents deemed necessary. When he returned, he explained that the vicar was in the church attic and refused to come out. However, the vicar did instruct his housekeeper to loan Jamie some paper and ink, but by the time the boy finally returned with it, the day was too far gone for me to write a message and for Jamie to return to the village with it."

"Does the mail stop at this village?"

"Yes, or so the Mellises assure me."

"Very good. Now we must decide whom to notify of our location. Randson would probably be the most—"

A soft scratching upon the door interrupted Thayne. Jumping to her feet, Beatrice hurried to open the door.

"Good morning, Mrs. Thayne," a cheerful voice sounded from the hallway. "I was hoping I wouldn't be waking you up. How is our patient this morning?"

"Good morning, Mrs. Mellis. He is in excellent condition considering the amount of blood he lost yesterday. I am pleased to tell you that your prognostication proved correct. There has been not one sign of a fever. Won't you step inside?"

"Yes, for I would like to see my patient. His dressing should need changing by now. Jamie will be up in a few minutes with a tray of breakfast and your dress. 'Tis sorry I am to say that I couldn't get all the blood out, but at least it's clean and mended. I'm sure ye'll be glad

to get back in your own clothes again.”

When Mrs. Mellis removed the dressing from Thayne’s shoulder, she nodded approvingly, noting that the wound showed no signs of inflammation and that the bleeding had slowed to a seepage. Then she applied her special salve for wounds, wrapped the shoulder in a fresh bandage and informed her patient that with proper rest and sustenance, he should soon be on his feet again.

“I cannot adequately express my appreciation, Mrs. Mellis,” Thayne began, but his hostess waved him to silence.

“Time enough for thanks when you’re all recovered, Mr. Thayne. Besides, from what your little wife was telling us, we should be thanking you. ‘Twas a brave thing you did, trying to protect your country from them heathenish Frenchies. Ah, here’s Jamie with your breakfast. Eat hearty, now, Mr. Thayne. I never did hold with feeding broth to an invalid. ‘Tis good food that will help you get your strength back.”

Mrs. Mellis turned to smile at Beatrice. “And you’ll be hungry too Mrs. Thayne, after the strain of seeing your poor husband shot down by a traitor. After you’ve finished your meal, you can write that note to your people and Jamie will take it in to the village.”

Beatrice needed no encouragement to eat. The smells wafting from the covered tray set her stomach to grumbling loudly.

“Well, now,” Mrs. Mellis said, grinning. “From the sounds of things, I think I had best stay and help Mr. Thayne with his breakfast so you won’t be delayed in eating yours, Mrs. Thayne.”

Beatrice had no objections to that plan. The less she had to do with Thayne, the happier she would be, she told herself. She especially wanted to avoid increasing any hint of intimacy between them, as must occur should she be forced to feed the infuriating man.

“That would be very kind of you, Mrs. Mellis,” Beatrice said. “I find I am near famished this morning.”

“Well, and so you should be, you poor little thing, seeing as how you was near nauseated last night with that terrible headache and couldn’t do justice to your supper. Besides, I’ve had more experience than you feeding invalids, I don’t doubt.”

“You had a headache?” Thayne asked, staring at Beatrice. A frown of concern touched his brow.

“Nothing serious, I assure you,” Beatrice murmured, turning her back to him while filling a plate from the tray Jamie had placed on the table near the door.

“The brave little thing,” Mrs. Mellis murmured. “Now Mr. Thayne, we’ll just pull you up a bit.”

“I can sit up by myself,” the marquess informed her tersely. “Why

do you say Miss—err, Mrs. Thayne is so brave?”

“Now look at you! Pushing yourself up with that left arm! You’ll reopen that wound if you’re not careful, Mr. Thayne. Oh very well! I can see you’re one of them men what can’t abide having a woman help them. But you’ll have to let me hold your plate for you. There’s no table in the house that will fit across the bed.”

Thayne was puffing a bit by the time he had pushed himself up enough to lean against the headboard, but he still had strength enough, Beatrice noted, to repeat his earlier question. “Why is Mrs. Thayne so brave?”

Mrs. Mellis paused in her chore of cutting up Thayne’s sirloin. “Why, the poor little dear did not say a word about that terrible knot on the back of her head, so concerned was she with getting you into bed and seeing that your wound was cared for. It wasn’t until she near passed out that she told me she had hit her head so hard. Well, of course when I saw that lump, I sent Mr. Mellis over to the Squire’s for a piece of ice. The Squire’s got a nice ice house, and he’s real generous when a body needs ice for medicinal purposes. Mrs. Thayne felt much better after lying down with an ice pack on her head for a while.”

“How did you hurt your head, my poor little dear?” Thayne inquired. His tone was light, but his gaze was penetrating. “That must have occurred after I passed out.”

Beatrice had no desire to discuss her head, but she could see Thayne was not going to drop the subject. “I hit my head on a branch,” she muttered between bites of Mrs. Mellis’ scrambled eggs.

“Why did you do that?” Thayne asked with raised eyebrows. “Trying to knock some sense into it?”

Beatrice glared at him while stuffing half a roll into her mouth so she would not be tempted to respond as she would like while Mrs. Mellis was in the room.

Mrs. Mellis chuckled. “Why, you’re quite a tease, aren’t you, Mr. Thayne? And you as weak as a kitten too! ‘Tis no wonder Mrs. Thayne loves you so much. The poor little dear was near out of her mind with worry about you. Here now, take a bite of my eggs before they get cold. You need to rebuild your strength, you know.”

Mrs. Mellis continued to chatter while feeding Thayne his breakfast, much to Beatrice’s relief. She recognized full well that Thayne’s comment about knocking some sense into her head referred to her refusal to marry him. No doubt he thought her witless because she had not accepted his proposal with alacrity and deep appreciation. Well, he would soon learn that, whatever the consequences of their adventure, she would not marry him.

“Very good, Mr. Thayne,” Mrs. Mellis was saying. “You’ve eaten a

good breakfast for a man in your condition. Now I'll just slip down to the kitchen so Mrs. Thayne can get dressed and write that letter. Jamie'll have to leave within the next hour if he's to get to the village before the mail comes through." After quickly gathering their dirty dishes, Mrs. Mellis grabbed the tray and hurried out.

Suppressing a cowardly desire to dash out of the room clinging to Mrs. Mellis' apron strings, Beatrice instead lifted her chin and returned the intense stare Thayne had leveled at her.

"How did you hurt your head, Beatrice?" he asked firmly.

Beatrice sighed deeply and then explained, giving as few particulars as possible, considering Thayne's continuous demand for details.

"Not very wise of you," Thayne said upon hearing that she had tried to hold him up. "But very thoughtful. And I do appreciate your effort. Now if Jamie is not to miss the mail, you should get dressed."

"Yes, my lord," Beatrice responded through her teeth as she curtsied deeply. "Anything you say, my lord. I shall obey instantly, my lord, if I may trouble your lordship to turn his head."

Thayne opened his mouth, then seemed to think better of what he had been about to say and shut it again. Without speaking, he closed his eyes and turned his head toward the wall.

Beatrice was not accustomed to dressing without help, but on this particular morning, she donned her gown more quickly than she could have done had half the maids in London been assisting her. When she had finished the last button, she breathed a sigh of relief. "You may open your eyes now, my lord."

Thayne turned his head and opened his eyes very wide. "I assure you, my dear, that the sight of you makes the wait well worthwhile."

Unsure of how to interpret that comment, Beatrice decided not to risk responding. Instead she hurried to the door, pausing with her hand on the latch. "I'll just fetch the paper and ink and be right back. Then we can decided to whom—"

A knock on the door interrupted Beatrice. She opened the door to Mrs. Mellis, whose eyes sparkled with curiosity.

"A Mr. Randson is downstairs inquiring about the two of you. He said he was staying in the village and heard about you through the vicar's housekeeper. Our Jamie, of course, had told her about you folks being here. This Mr. Randson claims to be a friend of yours, Mr. Thayne, but I have my doubts because he sure seemed surprised to hear that the two of you are married."

Chapter Sixteen

All three of the ladies who departed from the Fox and Kits the following morning in the Earl of Randson's traveling coach were in a subdued and morose mood. Beatrice and Chloe, seated with their backs to the horses, stared at their hands, which were clasped tightly in their laps, while Henrietta gazed out the window and muttered beneath her breath. Her most frequently intelligible words were "blasted housekeeper."

At last Chloe looked up. "I hardly see," she said, glaring across the coach at Henrietta, "what reason you have to blame Mrs. Dalton for your futile search. After all, if Mr. Phillips had immediately informed her of his reasons for rummaging about in the church attic, she could have told him then that the bulk of the manuscripts had been thrown away years ago, thus saving you both a great deal of time and trouble."

"And," Beatrice added, "she also could have explained that Mr. Phillips' predecessor stored those manuscripts in the attic after every publisher in London had turned him down. Obviously the former vicar's talents were far inferior to those of Shakespeare."

Henrietta sniffed. Then, to Chloe's amazement, she also chuckled. "At least I have a good reason for being grouchy," she said with an abashed grin. "Few people have made bigger fools of themselves than I. What excuse do you girls have for looking as though your future is in a shambles?"

"Perhaps it is," Chloe murmured, dropping her gaze again.

"Bah! Some shambles. Each of you has recently received a very flattering proposal of marriage."

Chloe lifted her chin again, hoping her companions would not notice that it was trembling. "I hardly find it flattering to be informed that I am to marry a man because I have been seen with him in a compromising situation. Thus, I am not going to marry the Earl of Randson. I don't care what he or my brother says, and I don't care if my reputation is ruined. I will not marry him."

"And I certainly do not intend to accept the Marquess of Thayne's proposal," Beatrice added. Then, to Chloe, "I could have kicked Richard, acting as though Thayne and Randson were rushing to our rescue on white chargers. If I ever marry, it will not be because some gentleman feels obligated to offer for me."

Chloe blew out her breath in a deep sigh. "Whatever are we going

to do, Bea? Mama will be terribly disappointed if we return to Crowell Manor before the end of the Season, but I do not think I can bear staying in London and being forced to refuse Randson day after day.”

“And I certainly cannot stay in the same house with Thayne,” Beatrice responded. “I know he will continue to harass me about marrying him and I do not know— I mean, I do not want that.”

Henrietta cocked her head to one side, a puzzled expression on her face. “No doubt I am a bit obtuse, but I cannot understand why you girls are refusing to marry the men you love. Oh you needn’t stare at me as though I had sprouted horns. Any fool could see you love them. Every time their names are mentioned, your expressions go all soft and dreamy.”

Chloe expected her sister to vehemently deny any attachment to Thayne, but when Beatrice merely dropped her gaze, Chloe realized Henrietta had been more observant than she. “Bea,” she murmured. “Not you too, my dear?”

“What does that mean?” Henrietta asked quickly. “You make it sound as though love were some sort of disease to which both of you have succumbed.”

“It can feel that way, my lady,” Chloe said. “At least if there is a possibility that one’s feelings are not reciprocated.”

“But both men have offered to marry you.”

“Exactly. But Lady Henrietta, would you wish to marry the man you loved if there was even the slightest chance he was offering for you only because he felt obligated to? I know that Randson claims to love me, but how can I be sure?”

“And Thayne doesn’t even pretend to love me,” Beatrice added with a gloomy sigh.

“Hmm, I see,” Henrietta said, frowning as she again transferred her gaze to the passing scenery.

Chloe reached to pat her twin on the arm. “I’m so sorry, Bea. I suppose we have no choice but to go home and confess all to Mama and Papa. I know they will support us, but I dread the look on Mama’s face when she realizes that we have made such a mess of our Season.”

A grin suddenly appeared on Henrietta’s face. “There’s no need to disturb your parents. Both of you can come home with me.”

Beatrice’s eyes widened. “But Lady Henrietta, we *are* going home with you.”

“No, no. I don’t refer to Thayne’s town house. I mean to my place near Brighton. I have grown tired of London and am looking forward to getting back to my own house. I am very fond of my little estate. My brother bought it for me before he died, knowing how much I valued my independence. Still, it can become a bit lonely at times. I

would be delighted if you girls would join me there for a few weeks.”

Chloe observed Henrietta through narrowed eyes. “Why?” she asked baldly.

“Because I enter into your feelings. No woman should have to marry a man simply because she was alone with him for a few hours, thus providing people with an opportunity to draw unfounded conclusions about what happened during those hours. Women, I have always believed, deserve more of a voice in their lives, and the predicament in which you young ladies find yourselves is another example of how that voice is so often denied us.”

“Oh my,” Chloe said, gazing at Henrietta as though she were seeing that lady in a new and more flattering light.

“You do have a point,” Beatrice said thoughtfully. “My own parents have allowed me an unusual degree of freedom, but even so, my opportunities are as nothing when compared to my brother’s.”

“And despite my love for scholarly works, I have never had the educational opportunities a man would enjoy,” Chloe added.

“Exactly,” Henrietta said. “If I had been born a male like my twin, I could have done almost anything I wished with my life. Since I was a female, and not an especially attractive one at that, I was forced to become an eccentric in order to attain a degree of freedom. Eccentrics, I have found, have much more leeway than an ordinary person.”

“Then it’s all an act?” Chloe asked on a gasp.

Henrietta grinned. “Most of my behavior is assumed, yes, although I do enjoy both my writing and my cats. I simply choose to exaggerate everything I do to the point of eccentricity.”

“But this is wonderful,” Beatrice cried, clapping her hands in delight. “I have always liked you, my lady, but I had no idea of the depth of your deviousness. I salute you.”

Chloe took a deep breath. “And I too salute you, my lady. I cannot honestly say I have always liked you, but now my respect for you is unbounded. I wish I had your courage.”

“Bah! You don’t need courage, girl—just determination. But I don’t recommend my life for everyone. Marriage to the right man would be much preferable, I assure you. On the other hand, nothing could be worse than marriage to the wrong man. If you decide to visit with me, I am sure the three of us can figure out a way to determine whether those men of yours really want to marry you or whether they are insisting on marriage because they feel it is the honorable thing to do.”

Beatrice nodded. “I cannot speak for Chloe, my lady, but there is nothing I would rather do than visit with you. However, I would not wish to hurt Lady Thayne’s feelings.”

“Don’t be concerned about that, child. After all, Sophia asked me to look after you while she is at Chiloath. I shall simply leave a note for her, telling her that I grew homesick and insisted upon you girls accompanying me to my house for a visit.”

“Suppose Lord Randson and the marquess follow us?” Chloe asked.

Henrietta raised her eyebrows. “I hardly think we need worry about that immediately. Thayne won’t be back on his feet for at least two weeks and Randson has promised to stay with him until both can return to London.”

“That’s true,” Beatrice said, her eyes shining with dawning hope. “And Richard will be engaged for the next few days in trying to track down Captain Balcorn. When we reach London, we can pack and leave again this very afternoon.”

“That’s the spirit,” Henrietta said. “We’ll be settled near Brighton before anyone misses us.”

Chloe wrinkled her brow while considering Henrietta’s proposal, then started when Beatrice suddenly grasped her hand. “Please agree, Chloe,” Beatrice said softly.

Chloe squeezed Beatrice’s hand and smiled. “But of course I agree, dear. I was just wondering what will happen when Lord Randson and the marquess follow us.”

“By then,” Henrietta responded, a smug grin on her face, “we will have devised some scheme to prove to those two dashing knights that their lovely damsels are not at all in need of being rescued.”

“What do you think, Bea? Are we merely making bad matters worse?” Chloe had seated herself on the edge of her sister’s bed and sat staring into the small blaze crackling in the hearth. Although the night was warm, Henrietta’s housekeeper had asked permission to light fires in each girl’s chamber to help dispel the mustiness that had invaded the house during the weeks Henrietta had been away.

Beatrice looked up from the letter she was writing to their parents. “Goodness, Chloe. What has brought on this sudden fit of uncertainty? I thought we had agreed that accepting Lady Henrietta’s invitation was what we both wanted.”

“I suppose so,” Chloe said. “But what did we think we would accomplish, Bea? Lord Randson and the marquess will simply follow us and continue to insist that we marry them. Eventually we will both agree, and then—”

“Why are you so certain we will agree?” Beatrice interrupted. She laid her pen down and turned to give Chloe her full attention. “Chloe, dear, what is really bothering you?”

Chloe sighed deeply and then fell backward on the bed where she lay staring up into the white bed-hangings. "Oh I don't know, Bea. It is just that—"

A clamorous knock interrupted Chloe. She sat up quickly on the bed while Beatrice hurried to open the door.

"Har," Henrietta greeted them. "Getting all settled in? I hope you do not object to having separate chambers. I thought it would be good for each of you to have your privacy, but if you would prefer to share —"

"Not at all, Lady Henrietta," Beatrice interrupted. "We appreciate your thoughtfulness. Chloe is merely visiting with me while I write to our parents. I must tell them where we are, of course."

"As to that," Henrietta began, her face coloring abruptly, "I fear I have a small confession to make."

"What?" Chloe and Beatrice asked in one voice. They exchanged concerned glances.

"You will recall that I left a note in Thayne's town house for Sophia to find when she returns from Chiloath?"

"Yes?" Beatrice said.

"I told her that the two of you have returned to your parents' home."

"But why?" Chloe demanded, pushing herself off the bed. She hurried to stand beside Henrietta. "You are looking a bit faint, my lady. Please sit down."

"No, no, I am fine. I am merely concerned that perhaps I did not do the right thing after all. I had intended, you see, to send Thayne and Randson on a wild goose chase so you girls would have ample time to be certain of your own minds. Now, however, I can see that I may have created extra problems for you. You will have to tell your parents that you are staying with me, but you will also have to explain that Thayne and Randson will be visiting them in expectation of finding you there. Oh dear! I had not realized it might grow so complicated."

"But this is wonderful!" Chloe exclaimed, her glum expression changing into one of delight. "You have hit upon the very thing, my lady. We shall keep the marquess and Lord Randson dashing about England until they grow tired of the chase and decide to leave us alone."

Beatrice glowered at her sister. "Good heavens, Chloe. That is one of the least intelligent things I have ever heard you say. Of course the gentlemen are not going to give up the chase. Both feel their honor is involved."

"That is true," Chloe agreed on a sigh. "One would think women

were not capable of such feelings.”

“That’s it!” Henrietta exclaimed.

Beatrice and Chloe looked at her expectantly.

“We must find a means to ensure that your honor takes precedence over their honor.”

Beatrice and Chloe exchanged skeptical glances. “I hardly see, my lady—” Beatrice began.

“But it is the simplest thing in the world,” Henrietta interrupted. “First, however, let me be positive I understand your feelings in this matter. Both of you have been in compromising situations with the men you love and both men have proposed marriage as a result, but neither of you has accepted the proposal because you do not wish to marry under such circumstances. Am I correct?”

“I cannot speak for Chloe, but I certainly will not marry Thayne under these conditions,” Beatrice said.

Chloe blinked back tears. “Nor can I marry Lord Randson for such a reason.”

Henrietta beamed. “I am so delighted now that I gave in to impulse and told Sophia you would be returning to your parents’ home. By the time Randson and Thayne travel to Crowell Manor and then make their way back here, we should have you girls safely engaged to other men.”

Chapter Seventeen

The Marquess of Thayne sat back in his chair and glanced around the sparkling drawing room at Crowell Manor. It was a small but comfortably airy room that smelled faintly of polishing wax and roses. The two sofas and five chairs were flanked by tables that, despite being a bit old-fashioned, were of good quality and had been polished to a bright sheen. There was absolutely nothing, he told himself, to dislike in the chamber, and nothing about its atmosphere to oppress. So why was he feeling so oppressed?

Of course, the Crowell's ruddy-faced butler had looked at him as though he were half crazed merely because he had asked to see Miss Beatrice. That had been a bit irritating, but the oppression had descended when the butler informed him that Miss Beatrice was not at home. His reaction to that bit of news surprised him. After all, he had not really missed Beatrice in the sixteen days since he had last seen her. Well, actually fifteen days, eleven hours and forty-five minutes.

If he closed his eyes, he could picture her standing at the foot of his bed in the Mellises' guest chamber just before she left to join Chloe and Henrietta at the Fox and Kits. Her charming little face had been set in unusually solemn lines and she had kept her glistening green eyes focused on the bedpost beside his head. "I am very sorry, my lord," she had said, her voice little more than a whisper. "I appreciate the honor you do me, but I must again refuse your kind offer. Mrs. Mellis has assured me that she understands why I lied to her husband about our being married, and she tells me that should anyone be so rude as to inquire, she will swear I slept in the parlor last night. So, you see, there is not the least need for us to marry."

Thayne remembered that he had frowned at Beatrice. He had been weak, in pain and disgusted with himself for feeling so disgruntled at Beatrice's refusal. Of course, he did not really wish to marry the girl, he had assured himself. Still, he did owe her his life. He also recalled muttering some loverlike nonsense to her in the forest when he had been weakened by his loss of blood. She had every right to expect marriage. The fact that she did not should have come as a relief. He could not understand why her refusal had left him feeling so bereft.

For some reason, he had felt even worse when, two weeks later, he had been strong enough to return to his London town house only to learn that Beatrice and Chloe were not there. Yes, Wallace had assured him, the young ladies had indeed returned to London the week before

last, but they had stayed only long enough to pack and leave again that same day. He had understood that Lady Henrietta was escorting them to their parents' home.

Thayne had cursed softly to himself. He would have to follow them, of course, and alone too. Randson had arrived back in London to discover a missive waiting for him from his mother who was certain, for the fifth time that year, that she was dying and thus required the presence of her only child at her side. Lacking Randson's company, Thayne would have welcomed having Richard's escort to Crowell Manor, but Richard had not yet returned from Portsmouth where he had gone in search of Captain Balcorn.

One night's rest was all Thayne allowed himself before setting off for Crowell Manor. At least it was not a long drive, he consoled himself each time the curricule hit a rut and jarred his tender shoulder. Even so, perhaps it had been a mistake to drive himself, although he had been left with little choice. The coach was still undergoing repairs, his mother had not yet returned from Chiloath with the landau, and his Aunt Henrietta had left town in her own traveling coach so a groom could take Randson's back to him.

In one respect, Thayne was pleased that the twins had gone to their parents' home. After all, he would have found it necessary to visit Crowell Manor soon so he could speak with Beatrice's father. Although he had not been looking forward to that interview, he was strangely disappointed to learn that Mr. Crowell was also away from home. Thank goodness Beatrice's mother was here and willing to see him. Yet he could not help wondering why Catherine Crowell was taking so long to greet him.

Fifteen minutes later, Thayne decided that the Crowell household was sadly mismanaged. He could not imagine any excuse for leaving a guest sitting alone and ignored for half an hour, and he was debating whether to continue waiting or to show himself out when Catherine Crowell at last appeared in the drawing room doorway.

She was, he realized instantly, even more lovely than Chloe, although Catherine's beauty was more mature. She was also smiling at him, her expression warm and welcoming despite the fact that she was being supported on either side by a stalwart footman. Thayne jumped to his feet, silently cursing the boyish flush he could feel coloring his face. Rarely had he felt so thoroughly ashamed of himself. His mother had told him, of course, that her friend Catherine was an invalid, but he had somehow assumed that Mrs. Crowell's maladies—like those of Randson's mother—were mostly imaginary. Obviously he could not have been more wrong.

"How wonderful to meet you at last, Lord Thayne," Mrs. Crowell said. "I have felt close to you for so many years, having kept abreast

of all of your activities through my dearest Sophia.”

Thayne bowed deeply, feeling like an awkward schoolboy while waiting for the footmen to lead Mrs. Crowell to a large upholstered chair and carefully lower her frail frame onto the soft cushions.

“You must forgive me for keeping you waiting so long, my lord,” Catherine said once she was seated and had dismissed the footmen. “As you can see, my health is not robust. Please take a seat. I am looking forward to getting to know you.”

Thayne selected a chair facing his hostess and flashed his most charming smile. “Thank you. And as for getting to know me, since you have been a friend of my mother’s for so many years, you probably know more about me than I know about myself.”

Catherine chuckled softly. “Well, at least about your early years,” she agreed. “You probably don’t recall when your first tooth came in.”

“Do you?” Thayne asked, aghast.

Catherine smiled and shook her head. “Not to the day, of course, but I do remember how excited Sophia was. However, I must not bore you with reminiscences about events you cannot recall.”

Thayne took a deep breath. Catherine Crowell looked so lovely and so fragile, he felt like a beast for having disturbed her. “I must apologize for having asked to see you, Mrs. Crowell. Of course, I am pleased to have met you at last, but I fear... That is... I mean...”

“Please don’t apologize. This is a treat for me—having an excuse to leave my sitting room. Besides, I have felt amazingly better recently, ever since I started using a recipe Beatrice sent me. She advised me that this particular medicine comes highly recommended by a lady she referred to as Mrs. Mellis. Unfortunately, Beatrice failed to tell me how I might address a thank you letter to the lady. Is she a friend of your family’s, perhaps?”

Thayne opened his mouth and then closed it again. What was going on? And where was Beatrice?

Catherine Crowell regarded him closely, a concerned expression in her lovely sapphire eyes. “You appear perplexed, my lord. But of course! Now I recall that Beatrice also mentioned in her letter that you and Lord Randson might be calling here in the belief that she and Chloe had come home. She did not, however, tell me why you would have been under such a misapprehension. In fact, there was so much that Beatrice did *not* tell me in her letter, I got the distinct impression that she has gotten herself into some sort of scrape again. Perhaps you can enlighten me.”

Half an hour later, the Marquess of Thayne felt as though he had known Catherine Crowell for years, and he could only applaud his

mother's intense loyalty toward this enchanting and brave lady. She has listened to his tale quietly, usually with a calm smile on her face. Her expressive eyes had brightened when he divulged his association with Richard and darkened when he had described his and Beatrice's abduction. But she had rarely interrupted and had gasped only when he told about the bullet that had torn into his shoulder. Twice her lips had twitched suspiciously, once when he told of Beatrice following him to Richard's rooms and again when he tried to explain why Beatrice had lied to Mr. Mellis about their marital status.

He concluded his story by saying, "So I am sure you understand, Mrs. Crowell, why I wish to marry Beatrice."

Catherine Crowell stared into his eyes for several seconds before replying. "Let us say, rather, that I understand why you feel you must offer for Beatrice. What I do not know is whether you really wish to marry her. Or, for that matter, whether she wants to marry you. I must assume she does not, since she and Chloe have fled London with your Aunt Henrietta."

"The twins are with Aunt Henrietta?" Thayne asked.

"So Beatrice said in her letter. Tell me, my lord, am I correct in my assumption that you are not sure how you feel about Beatrice?"

Thayne found he could no longer sit still, staring into this lovely woman's astute eyes. He jumped to his feet and strode to the window where he pulled back the curtains and stood staring out at the neat rose garden. When he finally turned around again, he forced a smile.

"Frankly, ma'am, I have wondered recently if my mind has become addled. Sometimes I look at Beatrice and think her the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. At other times, if you will forgive my saying so, she appears somewhat, ah..."

"Ridiculous?" Catherine suggested, smiling.

Thayne shook his head. "I think I would have said that she appears less than regal. But at those times, such as when she was crawling about on the bedroom floor, I find myself admiring her. She is very brave, you know, and very loyal."

"I know," Catherine Crowell agreed softly. She appeared to be biting her lip. "But tell me this, my lord—do you like Beatrice?"

His eyes opened wide. "Of course I like her. She is one of the finest women I have ever met."

"I see. And does she like you?"

The Marquess of Thayne groaned softly. "I have absolutely no idea, ma'am. Sometimes she appears to like me well enough. At others, she appears to hate me."

Catherine's lips twitched and she dropped her gaze to her lap for a few seconds. When she looked up again, an expression of

determination was clearly written in her eyes. "Thank you for being honest with me, my lord. It is regrettable that my husband is away from home. He has gone north, supposedly on business. I know, of course, that he is looking for another doctor who may be able to help me. I wish I knew where he has gone so I could inform him that I am already feeling much better, thanks to Mrs. Mellis's remedy. However, we cannot afford to wait for his return."

"We cannot?" Thayne asked, gulping. What did she mean? Was she going to insist that he and Beatrice be married within the next few days? And if so, why the devil did he feel so happy about it? "But should I not speak with Mr. Crowell before we, ah, before we make any definite plans?"

"That will not be necessary. I do hope you will cooperate, my lord. I realize I am asking a great deal on short acquaintance, but—"

Catherine Crowell stopped speaking when the drawing room door was thrust open with an unusual amount of vigor. She turned, frowning slightly. "Yes, Witcomb?" she said to the butler. "What is it?"

Witcomb squared his shoulders. His ruddy face glowed with pride. "You have another caller, madam." Taking a deep breath, he increased his volume as though trying to make himself heard above the clamor of a crowded ballroom. "His Lordship, the Earl of Randson," he intoned.

Three days later, Catherine Crowell undertook her first journey in years that had not been instigated by her husband in the hopes of improving her health. She had as her escorts the Marquess of Thayne, the Earl of Randson, and her beloved son.

Richard had appeared almost on the heels of Randson, bursting into the house with a whoop of joy. He had leave to visit his family for a few days before joining in the search for Captain Balcorn and his cohorts, who had fled the country. Upon Richard's arrival, Thayne and Randson immediately slipped out of the drawing room to leave mother and son alone. Randson, disheveled from his flying trip to see his mother and his ensuing journey to Crowell Manor, suggested a stroll in the gardens so he could stretch his legs.

"I've been riding in that blasted curricule for five days," he had complained to his friend. "I found Mother as strong as a horse, as usual. Just feeling a bit neglected. I should visit her on a more regular basis, but I've been too involved with trying to win back Miss Chloe. Where are the twins, anyway?"

By the time Thayne had finished explaining what little he knew of Chloe's and Beatrice's activities after they left the Fox and Kits,

Witcomb had approached to inform them that Mrs. Crowell was requesting their presence.

"Absolutely not, Mother," Richard Crowell said as Thayne and Randson entered the drawing room. Both paused near the doorway, but Catherine saw them and motioned for them to enter.

"Please be seated gentlemen. I was just telling Richard of my plans to move to Brighton," she said, smiling happily. "He, of course, is reluctant for me to undertake such a journey because of my health. I have been trying to explain that, while my joints are still weak, the swelling and pain have lessened considerably in the last few days. Besides, my daughters need me."

"I'll go to Brighton, Mother," Richard offered quickly. "I'll bring Chloe and Beatrice back home with me."

Catherine's eyes darkened to indigo as determination filled them. "No, Richard, I will not be dissuaded. I have done little enough for my children over the past few years. Instead, Beatrice and Chloe have had to take care of me. Now that I am feeling better, it is my place to go to their aid."

"But when Father returns and finds you have undertaken such a journey, he will be half out of his mind with worry."

Catherine's chin jutted out stubbornly. "Much as I love your dearest papa and appreciate his concern for me, I cannot but feel that he should have devoted more time to his children rather than haring all over the country on fruitless quests looking for remedies for me. Leave it to Beatrice to find something that would at last help me."

Thayne slumped back in his chair. Yes, he thought. Leave it to Beatrice to find a way to help her mother. Beatrice, with her selfless care for others, with her unstinting loyalty toward those she loved.

And she loved him! The thought came unbidden, but he knew it was true. Had she not proven that love when she risked her reputation by lying to Mr. Mellis? Had she not proven that love when she refused Thayne's offer of marriage, knowing he did not love her?

But he did love her, and the realization filled him with joy. Thinking back, he decided he had loved her from the moment she had stood glowering up at him in his entrance hall after he had insulted Chloe. But how to prove his love? No matter what he said now, Beatrice was certain to think his words were based on obligation rather than affection. Obviously he was going to need help.

"Your mother is right, Richard," Thayne said. "If she feels well enough to undertake this journey, then she owes it to herself to come to the aid of her daughters."

"Mother may feel well enough to undertake the journey, but will her limited strength endure putting up at an inn for heaven knows

how long? I could ride ahead and try to lease a house, of course, but —”

“That won’t be necessary, Richard,” Thayne interrupted. “I have already leased a house in Brighton in anticipation of my mother wishing to spend the summer months there. It is standing vacant at the moment. I would be honored if you and your mother would agree to make use of it. I am sure you will both be quite comfortable. You may need to supplement the staff, of course, but—”

“Then that’s settled,” Catherine put in quickly. “I suggest we plan to leave three days from now. That will allow sufficient time for me to pack and for you three gentlemen to recover from your travels. I’ve asked that rooms be made ready for both of you. Now if someone will call the footmen, I shall return to my rooms and rest for a while before dinner.”

“There’s no need for footmen, ma’am,” Richard said, smiling as he hurried to his mother’s side and bent over her. He scooped her up into his arms as though she were no more than a child. “I’ve often wondered where Chloe got her stubborn streak,” he said, grinning with simple pride. “Now I know.”

Chapter Eighteen

Both Chloe and Beatrice steadfastly refused to allow themselves to become engaged to other men, despite Henrietta's assurances that her elderly friends would perfectly understand that it was all a pretense.

"But it would be a pretense that was solely without honor, my lady," Chloe objected. She had seated herself on the edge of Beatrice's bed and watched calmly while Beatrice paced from one side of the chamber to the other.

"And honor, if you will recall," Beatrice added, stopping to regard Henrietta with a severe expression, "is what we are striving for. If Chloe and I had no honor, we would accept Randson's and Thayne's proposals and be done with it. But never fear, I shall think of something."

"Oh dear," Chloe murmured softly.

"What did you say, Chloe?" Beatrice demanded, turning to stare at her sister with a glint of suspicion in her eyes.

Chloe gazed demurely into her lap. "I said, 'Yes dear.'"

"Oh did you?"

"Come, Bea. Have I not always supported your plots—I mean, plans?"

"Well, sister dear, now that you mention it—"

"Bah," Henrietta interjected. "I still think my original idea was an excellent one. If Randson and Thayne arrive to find you girls already betrothed, they will either stay and fight for you or turn and beat a relieved retreat. In either case, you will know just where you stand in your gentlemen's affections."

When neither Chloe nor Beatrice would agree to participate in Henrietta's scheme, she pranced out of Beatrice's bedchamber, obviously in a snit. She was back half an hour later apologizing.

"Don't know what's come over me, trying to force my ideas on other people. I've never cared to be forced myself. Daresay that in playing the role of an eccentric for all these years, I've grown to be one. Hope you young ladies can bear with me."

Chloe rushed to give the crestfallen Henrietta a hug. "Certainly, my lady, if you can bear with two headstrong young chits."

Henrietta smiled mistily. "Good of you, Chloe. You are much like your mother after all. Now let's just forget about Thayne and Randson for a few days. Daresay you girls can decide for yourselves how to

handle them when the time comes. In the meantime, I think we should make some plans for entertaining ourselves. What would you girls suggest?"

Seeing the nearby town of Brighton topped Beatrice's and Chloe's list of things they would like to do. Neither had traveled a great deal, having always stayed close to Crowell Manor to care for their mother, but tales of the Prince Regent's fantastic pavilion had always intrigued them.

"Have you ever seen the Prince's residence, my lady?" Chloe asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Seen it? My dear child, I have watched it grow from an unpretentious farmhouse into this thing they call the Marine Pavilion. The first additions to the house were done according to a nice, classical plan with a central rotunda and flanking wings, but since then, the pavilion has grown into the monstrosity it is today."

"Monstrosity?" Beatrice repeated, shocked.

"Well, they keep adding wings, you know," Henrietta responded, a defensive note in her voice. "And then those shell-like green canopies over all the windows. Made me feel bilious just looking at them. Next, if I recall correctly, came the stables and riding house. The stables were constructed in a circle, you know, with stalls around the outside wall for forty-five horses and a fountain in the middle for watering them. And the cupola above it is said to be sixty-five feet high."

"Oh!" Beatrice breathed. "I can hardly wait to see it."

"Very well," Henrietta agreed amiably enough. "Brighton and the Pavilion it shall be."

"Are there libraries and bookstores in the town also?" Chloe asked.

"Of course, child. Never fear, we shall find plenty to amuse us in Brighton, even though the summer season will not begin for another month. Of course, it's a little early for sea bathing, but we can ride upon the cliffs along the coast if you like. And, of course, we shall promenade on the Steine, where I am certain to run into many of my old friends."

Beatrice and Chloe exchanged relieved glances and simultaneously nodded their heads. Staying busy, each realized, was essential if they were to keep from dwelling on their upcoming confrontations with the men they loved.

Two weeks later, Beatrice was growing concerned. She and Chloe had heard nothing from their mother except for a brief note saying she had been delighted to hear that the twins were visiting Lady Henrietta. Beatrice was also a bit disappointed because neither Thayne

nor Randson had appeared on the scene. Conversely, she was relieved. She dreaded having to dredge up the courage to refuse Thayne's proposal of marriage again.

Beatrice tried not to think of the Marquess of Thayne at all, for every time she did, her knees grew weak and a most unpleasant sensation settled in the pit of her stomach. If this was love, she decided, she could not imagine why the poets wished to romanticize it. She found nothing romantic about feeling as though her dinner had turned to stone in her stomach.

She wondered if Chloe experienced similar symptoms, but she hesitated to ask. Besides, she strongly suspected she already knew the answer to that question. After all, Chloe was equally enthusiastic about devoting all her energies to the various activities Henrietta had arranged for them.

The three ladies made almost daily trips into Brighton, where Beatrice and Chloe had at first stood gaping like rustics at the Prince Regent's marvelous Pavilion. Within days, however, the fantastic structure appeared so familiar as to be just another part of the landscape and the twins were content to turn their attention to more mundane projects.

The shops of Brighton boasted treasures fully as exciting as those on Oxford Street, and all three ladies succeeded in finding parasols, gloves, fans and bonnets that were such perfect accessories to gowns they already owned, they agreed it would be improvident not to purchase them.

They also spent two afternoons riding on the cliffs along the shore and admiring the seascape. Beatrice and Chloe privately agreed that the seascape was prettier than the landscape, which was rather barren, but both were careful not to criticize the countryside to their hostess. Henrietta appeared quite accustomed to the lack of vegetation around Brighton.

During the second week of their visit, Henrietta took the twins with her on calls to visit her nearest neighbors. General Thistlethwaithe, a retired military man, lived just a mile down the small country lane on which Henrietta's house was located. The general, a widower, lived with his spinster sister, and both appeared delighted to hear that Henrietta was moving back to the neighborhood.

"I knew you would not desert us for long, my dear," the angular Miss Thistlethwaithe declared warmly, clasping Henrietta's hands. "We have all missed you so much." Then she added with a sly grin and a simper, "Especially Mr. Pimm."

Henrietta introduced the twins to Mr. Pimm the following

afternoon. That gentleman, who lived on the opposite side of the lane from General Thistlethwaithe, had never been married, nor did he have a female relative living with him. Beatrice and Chloe were a bit shocked when they learned that Henrietta was actually going to visit him in his home, but they soon realized, with some degree of awe, that restrictions against females visiting bachelor establishments was one of society's constraints that Henrietta neatly avoided by exploiting her façade as an eccentric.

"Wouldn't do for you young ladies to come here alone, of course," she informed Beatrice and Chloe as they waited on the front steps for Mr. Pimm's butler to respond to their knock. "But since you are with me, no one will think a thing about it."

Sipping her tea in Mr. Pimm's drawing room a half hour later, Beatrice struggled to keep from laughing aloud. She was certain that she and Chloe had now been introduced to the gentlemen Henrietta had planned to recruit as their pretended fiancés. She could not help wondering which of the two Henrietta would have chosen for her—General Thistlethwaithe with his rotund body and his equally round head fringed by white hair or Mr. Pimm with his thin shoulders, skinny legs and protruding abdomen?

She could imagine Thayne's and Randson's reactions had they been told these gentlemen were her and Chloe's betrothed. Neither Thayne nor Randson would have believed for a minute that the girls had actually accepted proposals of marriage from two men old enough to be their great-grandfathers. But, Beatrice had to admit to herself, as unsatisfactory as Henrietta's plan had been, she herself had come up with nothing better.

Having racked her brain every night for over two weeks, Beatrice was still not a whit closer to concocting a suitable strategy for convincing Thayne and Randson that they should accept her and Chloe's refusals to their proposals. Of course, she admitted to herself with a wry grimace, such a scheme might well prove unnecessary anyway. It did not appear that Thayne and Randson were going to follow them after all.

"Are you woolgathering again, child?" Henrietta asked, reaching over to tap Beatrice on the knee. "Wake up. Mr. Pimm just asked you a question."

"I'm sorry, sir," Beatrice said, blushing hotly when she realized her host was grinning at her knowingly.

Mr. Pimm raised dark, bushy eyebrows that contrasted strangely with his yellowish-gray hair. "No apologies necessary, young lady," he said. Then, with a sly glance toward Henrietta, he added, "I know all about the distracting qualities of love."

Beatrice took a deep breath. "Nevertheless, sir, I apologize for not attending to you. Would you please repeat your question?"

"Just asked if you and your lovely little sister would like to see the interior of the Pavilion. Of course, Prinny isn't in residence yet, but I am well acquainted with his steward and can arrange a tour if you would be interested."

"Oh yes," Beatrice said. "That would be wonderful."

"How very kind of you, sir," Chloe added.

"That's settled then. I'll just send around a message when I have completed the arrangements. Or, better yet, I shall stop by myself to inform you ladies of the plans, if that's permitted." He regarded Henrietta with a hopeful expression.

Henrietta smiled and nodded. The ostrich plumes decorating the new bonnet she had bought in Brighton the day before continued nodding long after she had stopped. "Be delighted to have you come by any time, Mr. Pimm. But now the girls and I must go. Hope to see you soon—with news of our projected treat, of course."

"I think we should go home, Chloe," Beatrice said the following morning at the breakfast table. The mail had just been delivered, and there was still no letter from their mother. "Something must be wrong at Crowell Manor. I suspect Papa may have gone off on another of his trips and that Mama's condition worsened after he left. It is not like her to fail to respond to our letters."

"I fear you may be right, Bea. I wonder if we can afford to make the trip by post chaise? I would not wish to impose on Lady Henrietta by asking to use her carriage."

"What's this?" Henrietta demanded, just entering the small breakfast parlor. She generally slept later than the twins. "Did I hear you mention a post chaise, Chloe? Surely you girls aren't going to hare back to London looking for those two rascals who have apparently abandoned you?"

Henrietta lowered her substantial frame into a chair and shook her head sadly. "Never thought Thayne and Randson would be so backward in their attentions. Don't suppose Thayne's condition has worsened, do you?"

Beatrice paled. "If that were the case, surely Lord Randson would have notified you, my lady. Thayne is your nephew, after all."

"There is that," Henrietta agreed, nibbling on the end of her thumbnail. "But perhaps no one has yet figured out where we are. I'm beginning to wish I hadn't tried to mislead everyone about our direction."

Chloe bit her lip and lowered her gaze, although she looked up

quickly enough when the butler appeared at the door.

"I beg your pardon, m'lady," Collier said to Henrietta, "but a gentleman has called and is asking to see you and the Misses Crowell."

The three ladies looked at each other with hope brightening their eyes.

"Thayne," Beatrice murmured.

"Randson," Chloe breathed.

"Adolphos, no doubt," Henrietta exclaimed. Then, blushing, "I mean, Mr. Pimm. He did promise to call once he had completed arrangements for us to tour the Pavilion, you know."

The butler allowed a small sigh to ruffle his thin lips. "The gentleman gave me his name. He is Richard Crowell."

"Oh!" said three disappointed ladies.

"I'll put him in the front drawing room," Collier said before bowing and turning back toward the front door.

"Mama in Brighton! I don't believe it. How could you have allowed her to subject herself to such a strenuous journey, Richard?"

"Don't cut up at me, Beatrice. I tried to stop her. Never knew Mama could be so stubborn."

Chloe glanced from her sister's flashing eyes to her brother's defensive expression and sighed. "You mustn't blame Richard, Bea. If anyone is at fault, it is the two of us. We have obviously caused Mama a great deal of concern. Otherwise, she would not have undertaken a trip in her condition. Where is Papa, Richard?"

"Lord knows. Somewhere up north—looking for a doctor, we assume. But don't worry about Mama. She is feeling much better and appeared to enjoy the trip thoroughly. She and I are staying in a lovely house just a couple of streets off the Steine, and she is looking forward to my bringing all three of you to visit with her."

"All three of us?" Henrietta repeated.

"Yes. She particularly wishes to thank you, my lady, for your kindness toward the twins."

"My pleasure," Henrietta murmured, flushing. "Fine girls. I shall tell your mother so. When would it be convenient for us to call on her?"

"She is planning to rest this morning but hopes you will come for a visit around one o'clock."

"We shall be there," Henrietta said.

"Wonderful. Then I'll take my leave. I'll tell Mama to be expecting you."

Richard was halfway to the door when he turned around and

asked, a bit too casually, “By the way, did I mention that the Marquess of Thayne accompanied me and Mama to Brighton?”

“What?” Beatrice exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

“Yes,” Richard continued, affecting a look of nonchalance. “In fact, the house in which we are staying is leased to Thayne. He kindly made it available to Mama for her visit. Thayne and the Earl of Randson are putting up at the Old Ship Inn.”

“Lord Randson is in Brighton?” Chloe asked on a gasp. “Oh no!”

“Hurrah!” Henrietta shouted.

As soon as Richard had taken his leave, Chloe turned to Henrietta. “Would you excuse me and Bea, my lady? We should probably go to our chambers and decide on the gowns we wish to wear to visit Mama this afternoon.”

“Certainly,” Henrietta responded. “No doubt I should do the same. I’ll meet you both in the drawing room around half past noon. That should give us ample time to journey to your mother’s residence.

“Thank you, my lady,” Chloe said with a smile. She then grabbed Beatrice by the hand and pulled her up the stairs and into her bedchamber. She paused a few seconds to get her breath, then demanded, “Tell me, Bea. What scheme have you concocted that will enable us to avoid Lord Randson and the marquess?”

Bea didn’t respond immediately. Instead, she simply stood in the middle of the floor staring out into space.

“Well?” Chloe said. “Speak up, Bea.”

Beatrice sighed. “Be patient, Chloe. I’m still thinking.”

Chloe waited a few more seconds but when Beatrice continued to stand in the center of the room staring into space, she planted herself directly in front of her sister. “Perhaps it has escaped your attention, Bea, but it appears that Lord Randson and Lord Thayne have recruited Mama and Richard to their side.”

Beatrice blew out her breath in a long sigh. “You make this sound like a war, Chloe.”

“What is wrong with you, Bea? I believe you are hoping to be persuaded to marry Lord Thayne.”

Beatrice glowered at her sister. “And you, I suppose, do not wish to marry your precious Lord Randson?”

“You know I do. But we agreed not to be coerced into marriage simply because we were caught in compromising situations.”

Beatrice grimaced. “True, but frankly Chloe, I do not have any idea how we are to save ourselves. If Mama and Richard have aligned themselves against us—”

“Mama would never force us to marry against our will,” Chloe

interrupted. "You know she wants us to be happy."

"Of course she does. But in this case, either path we take will lead to unhappiness. Perhaps she will choose to guide us toward the path most sanctioned by society."

"Lud, Bea, you are growing prosy. I think your mind is addled."

"I think so too," Beatrice said on a moan. "And it's all because of the Marquess of Thayne. If I did not love him so much, I swear I would hate him."

Chloe sighed. "I believe what you are saying in your charmingly circuitous way is that you have no plan."

"Exactly," Beatrice agreed gloomily. "Do you suppose Lady Henrietta... No, we dare not ask her for help. She would merely come up with some ridiculous scheme such as pretending to betroth us to her elderly friends."

"You don't suppose..." Chloe paused and wrinkled her brow.

"Suppose what?"

"Oh, nothing. Just that, for a moment after Richard left, I thought I detected a gleam in Lady Henrietta's eyes such as I've noticed before when she was scheming to help us."

Beatrice gnawed on her thumbnail a minute, then shook her head. "I doubt Lady Henrietta would risk concocting a scheme when Mama is nearby. She would not wish to offend Mama."

A smile of relief brightened Chloe's face. "You're right, of course. I'm sure we have nothing to worry about. Now which gown should I wear this afternoon?"

Chapter Nineteen

“No offense, Lady Henrietta, but I think your wits have gone a’begging,” the Earl of Randson said, frowning at the woman who had so shocked him by calling upon him and Thayne at the Old Ship Inn.

“For coming here unchaperoned, you mean? Don’t be a nodcock, Randson. No one in Brighton will think any the less of me. I’m an eccentric, you know. Besides, it isn’t as though I had gone up to your chambers.”

“For which we are humbly grateful,” Randson said through his teeth. “However, I was not alluding to your request that we visit with you in the lobby of a public inn. I was referring to that ridiculous plan of yours.”

“It is not ridiculous,” Henrietta said, scowling. “In fact, it may be the only chance you and my bumbling nephew will ever have to win those two lovely girls.”

“You do not think we can talk them around then?” Thayne asked quickly.

“Not likely. It’s become a matter of honor for them, you see.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t see.”

Henrietta heaved an exasperated sigh and rolled her eyes upward. “Men are such fools,” she commented to the ceiling.

“Thank you,” her nephew responded, his lips twitching slightly. “My mother intimated much the same thing one day when we were discussing honor. The thing is, while I don’t question a lady’s right to live according to her own standards of what is ethical and moral, I fail to understand how Randson and I are trampling on the twins’ honor.”

“‘Tis especially difficult to understand, considering that we have extended them honorable proposals of marriage,” Randson added.

“They aren’t sure you love them,” Henrietta said simply.

“Then we shall just keep telling them that we do,” Randson retorted. “They are both sensible girls. Surely we can convince them eventually.”

“Not necessarily,” Henrietta said. “After all, they are convinced you feel honor-bound to marry them because they were found in compromising situations with you. They fear you will place your honor above your own happiness.”

“I’m getting tired of that word,” Randson complained. “I never knew honor could create so much havoc.”

“Am I to assume you are not willing to try my plan then?” Henrietta asked.

Thayne smiled, not unkindly, at his aunt. “We appreciate your interest, Aunt Henrietta, but I believe Randson and I prefer our own methods. As he said, Miss Beatrice and Miss Chloe are sensible young ladies, after all.”

Randson nodded. “They will soon see that marriage is the best alternative for all of us.”

Henrietta stood, her expression clearly disgruntled. “So be it. But my offer to help you still stands. Come to me if you decide to undertake my plan, but be certain not to mention it to the twins. All would be ruined should they become aware of it.”

The gentlemen also stood. “Thank you, Aunt Henrietta. We will keep that in mind,” Thayne said. “Will we see you at Mrs. Crowell’s this afternoon?”

“I’ll be there. No, no, nephew.” She waved a gloved hand in Thayne’s direction. “Don’t bother to escort me out. I know my way.”

Henrietta stomped out of the Old Ship’s lobby, her back stiff.

Randson stared after her, shaking his head slowly. “Don’t wish to offend you, Thayne, but your aunt has some peculiar notions.”

“She means well,” Thayne responded. “I wish it had been possible to refuse her help without offending her.”

“Never mind. When she sees that we can manage on our own to convince Miss Chloe and Miss Beatrice to marry us, she’ll realize that her ludicrous plan was unnecessary.”

“I certainly hope you are right, Randson,” Thayne said, frowning at the space his aunt had just vacated. “I certainly do.”

Beatrice and Chloe had spent the remainder of their morning sequestered in Beatrice’s chamber, trying to decide how they were to explain to their mother the reasons behind their reluctance to marry Thayne and Randson. They were still far from deciding on an approach when Henrietta stopped in the doorway. “I’m back,” she announced.

“Oh?” Beatrice said. “I didn’t realize you’d gone out. Will you come in and visit with us a moment?”

Nodding, Henrietta stepped into the chamber. “Have some news for you,” she said, selecting a sturdy chair and lowering herself onto it. “An errand took me to Brighton, and who should I meet but my nephew and the Earl of Randson. Thought I should share with you girls something of my conversation with the nodcocks.”

Five minutes later, Beatrice stared at Henrietta with wide and flashing eyes. “Lord Randson said what?” she screeched.

“Lord Randson said what?” Chloe repeated. Although her tone was much calmer than her sister’s, her expression was no less horrified.

Henrietta straightened her broad shoulders. “He said that, under the circumstances, marriage is the best alternative for all of you.”

“Better than what—being drawn and quartered?” Beatrice demanded.

“Now don’t get upset, child. After all, Thayne assured me that you and Chloe are sensible girls.”

“Sensible?” Chloe repeated on a gasp. “Lord Thayne actually called us sensible? What a terribly unromantic thing to say.”

“My God,” Beatrice murmured, dropping her head into her hands. “Both men are unfeeling beasts.”

Henrietta sighed. “Just so,” she said. Then, “Well, perhaps ‘unfeeling’ is a bit strong. However, I could not like their attitudes toward you girls. They seemed almost to...” She paused as though groping for words.

“Take our compliance for granted?” Beatrice offered.

“Think the worst of our motives?” Chloe suggested.

“Beasts,” Beatrice repeated. “They are unfeeling beasts.”

“Bumbling beasts, more like,” Henrietta murmured. Then more loudly, “I have no doubt you young ladies will know just how to handle them.”

“We certainly shall,” Beatrice confirmed, while Chloe nodded her head so vigorously that one of her curls escaped its pins and tumbled onto her shoulder.

Beatrice stared at that golden curl for long seconds. “Your hair, Chloe,” she said thoughtfully, beginning to gnaw on the side of her forefinger.

“Don’t worry, Bea. Lady Henrietta’s maid can repair it within seconds. Martha is wonderful with hair.”

“I think it needs more than repairs. That style is not at all sensible.”

“Sensible? Martha says it is the latest— Oh! I see what you mean.”

“I don’t,” Henrietta interjected. “Chloe’s hair is lovely. Why would she want a sensible— Ah! Sensible!”

“Exactly,” Beatrice said. “Since we are going to be labeled sensible, should we not also look sensible? If we hurry, there is plenty of time to change before going to visit Mama. You did say that Lord Thayne and Lord Randson would be there too, did you not, Lady Henrietta?”

“So they indicated to me.”

“Wonderful,” Beatrice said, jumping to her feet. “Chloe, let us prepare to be *sensible*.”

Catherine Crowell had dressed with particular care for her afternoon’s entertainment. She had not seen Henrietta in over twenty years, but she had not forgotten how intimidating that lady could be. Not that Henrietta had ever been less than kind to her. In fact, Catherine reminded herself, it was just the opposite. Henrietta had seemed to go out of her way to be genial during those unnerving days when the youthful Catherine had been new to London. It was not Henrietta’s fault that Catherine was completely awed by that lady’s brusque manners and casual attitude toward the *ton*.

Still, she wanted to make a good impression on Henrietta, not just for her own sake, but also because she felt indebted to Henrietta for looking after the twins in Sophia’s absence. It could not have been easy for a serious-minded woman like Henrietta to deal with two flighty and occasionally mischievous young chits fresh from the country.

“The Lady Henrietta and the Misses Crowell,” Thayne’s butler announced from the drawing room door.

Catherine looked up eagerly, more anxious than she would have imagined to see her lovely girls again. But who were those pathetic creatures trailing into the room in Henrietta’s wake? Surely Henrietta’s eccentricities did not extend to dragging two poorly paid companions around with her.

“Mama,” one of the pathetic creatures called out, dashing to Catherine’s side. The other was on her heels.

Catherine looked up into her daughters’ faces and bit back a moan. Never had she seen either appear so unattractive. Chloe’s hair was pulled back into a severe bun. Beatrice’s was pushed up inside a bonnet that was several years out of style. Chloe was dressed in one of her oldest gowns, one that had been made up for her by a less-than-adequate dressmaker in Little Chilton. The once pale blue fabric had faded to a dingy beige, made to appear even dingier by the ugly brown fichu Chloe had stuffed inside the modest neckline.

Beatrice looked even worse. Catherine did not recognize her gown. It was a high-necked, long-sleeved merino that reminded Catherine of the dresses her governess had worn thirty years before.

“My g-girls,” Catherine stammered, aware that she was staring yet incapable of tearing her gaze away from her once-lovely twins. “How are you?”

“Delighted to be seeing you again, Mama,” Chloe chirped, dropping to her knees beside her mother’s chair and reaching to grasp

her limp hand. "More importantly, how are you?"

"Yes, Mama. How are you?" Beatrice demanded, bending to place an enthusiastic kiss upon her mother's cheek. "Richard said you were feeling better, but you look a little pale to me. Are you sure you are not overextending your strength?"

Catherine breathed a soft sigh of relief. Her girls might look different, but they still sounded like the same sweet girls she had sent to London. With an effort, she forced herself to look away from her daughters and found herself being regarded by a half-smiling lady who did not appear to have aged a day in the last twenty years.

"Lady Henrietta," Catherine said. "How lovely to see you again. You must forgive my not rising. I am still weak, but I find myself feeling better each day, thanks to the recipe for a medication Beatrice obtained for me. Do be seated, my lady."

"Then Mrs. Mellis's remedy is helping, Mama?"

"Yes, Beatrice, it is. But you girls are forgetting your manners. We must not bore Lady Henrietta with a discussion of my maladies."

"Nonsense," Henrietta said gruffly, lowering herself into an overstuffed chair. "You will want a few moments to exchange news with your daughters. Just pretend I am not here."

"We would never wish to do that, my lady," Chloe said, smiling warmly at Henrietta. "You have been such a—"

"Bah!" Henrietta interrupted. "None of that, if you please, child. What you should be doing is explaining to your mother why you are dressed in those terrible clothes. I thought the poor dear was going to swoon when the two of you burst into the room."

"Yes," Catherine said weakly. "I believe I could do with an explanation."

"What do you think, Thayne? Should I ask Miss Chloe to go walking with me this afternoon?" The Earl of Randson frowned at himself in the mirror as he reached up to readjust his neckcloth a bit. "Should I retie my cravat? Is the Oriental style a bit too elaborate for this afternoon?"

"I have no idea, Randson," Thayne responded impatiently.

"No idea? But you're sporting a Mathematical. Surely the Oriental is no less—"

"I wasn't responding to your last question, Randson, but to your first. Your cravat is fine, but I refuse to advise you on your pursuit of Miss Chloe. Could we go now? I would not want to keep Mrs. Crowell waiting."

"A bit impatient, aren't you, Thayne? Is it my fault I ruined five cravats while trying to tie a decent Oriental? You, I suspect, didn't

need more than one attempt to achieve that marvelous creation. You always look as though you've spent hours in front of the mirror. Where are my gloves?"

"On the table beside the door. Your cane is there, also. Are you ready?"

"I suppose so. I can hardly wait to see Miss Chloe. She must have been wondering what had become of us. I wish I could have seen her face when Richard told her that we were in Brighton."

"You sound surprisingly confident, Randson. As I recall, you said Miss Chloe was quite consistent in refusing your offers of marriage after that debacle on the road when you were searching for Miss Beatrice and me."

"Yes, but then she was frantic with worry. Now she has had time to consider the situation. She will understand that marriage is the best alternative. Unfortunately, I fear you will have more difficulty convincing Miss Beatrice to marry you. She is not quite as sensible as Miss Chloe, you know."

"Miss Beatrice is eminently sensible, Randson. She is undoubtedly one of the most sensible females it has ever been my honor to meet. You should have seen her binding up my wound in that blasted, drippy forest. And then—"

"Yes, yes, I know. She saved your life. I've heard that tale more than a few times, Thayne, and I agree that Miss Beatrice is all that is admirable. However, she is also a bit impetuous and not nearly as prudent as Miss Chloe."

"Randson, could we please agree that Miss Chloe and Miss Beatrice are both extremely reasonable young ladies? Because if we don't leave immediately, I fear we will arrive at Mrs. Crowell's only to discover that both of the twins were sensible enough not to bother waiting for us."

Thayne had not wished to admit to Randson just how unnerved he was by the thought of seeing Beatrice again. Would she look at him and immediately detect the change in his emotions? Would she recognize that his feelings of admiration for her had matured into a strong and lasting love?

And if she did not, how was he to convince her? Despite his contentions to his aunt that morning, Thayne was not at all sure he could persuade Beatrice that he loved her. Damn society's views on compromising situations anyway! He only hoped he could make Beatrice understand that he wished to marry her for reasons that had nothing to do with honor.

He realized that task was not going to be easy the moment he and

Randson stepped into the drawing room and he observed the two Crowell twins dressed up like a pauper's poorest relatives.

"C-Chloe!" Randson stammered, his eyes widening.

Chloe Crowell immediately thrust her lovely chin into the air. "Good afternoon, Lord Randson." Her tone would have formed icicles on the hottest July day. "Perhaps—if you can manage to stop gaping at me—you will wish to greet your hostess and the other ladies present."

Randson shut his mouth with a snap. Flushing, he hurried to bow over Catherine's hand and stammer out a greeting.

Thayne experienced difficulty in controlling his twitching lips. What were the two chits up to now? Determined not to fall into their trap as Randson had done, he smiled complacently, greeted Catherine and kissed his aunt's hand.

He turned at last to Beatrice, aware that his eyes were twinkling despite the solemn expression he had managed to maintain. "Has anyone told you how charming you look this afternoon, Miss Beatrice?"

She curtsied and smiled. "Actually, my lord, 'charming' was not the effect Chloe and I were striving for when we dressed today. Surely a man of the world such as yourself could think of a more appropriate compliment. Perhaps, shall we say, sensible?"

"Sensible? Why would you wish—? Ah! I see. I believe someone has been carrying tales about me." Thayne glanced toward his aunt, then turned back to address Beatrice again.

"I was not aware that the dressmakers of Brighton were attempting to set a new style for the nation." Thayne regarded Beatrice's gown through his quizzing glass. "I wonder if it will catch the public's fancy."

Beatrice tossed her head and her bonnet, obviously one created for a larger head, listed to one side. She quickly straightened it. "I would not think such a style would become popular, my lord. So few people possess the perception needed to fully appreciate those things that can be described as 'sensible'. Do you not agree?"

"I can speak only for myself, of course, but I must admit that I have been known to be blind to the worth of particular qualities, especially when I was first introduced to them. However, upon longer acquaintance, I would find myself fully appreciating, even coming to love, those things I had once undervalued."

"L-I-love, my lord?" Beatrice stammered. "Do you really—?"

She was interrupted by a series of screeching questions coming from Chloe on the other side of the chamber. "Are you insane, my lord? How could you ask me to go walking with you when I look like

this? Do you not realize that I would rather die than go walking on the streets of Brighton in this garb?" Then, sobbing, she twirled and fled from the room.

"Excuse me, my lord," Beatrice murmured. "I must go to my sister."

Thayne watched Beatrice run from the room and realized he had just lost a rare opportunity to try to convince her of his feelings. He sighed, then said his goodbyes to Mrs. Crowell and made his way with Randson back to the Old Ship Inn.

Chapter Twenty

"Thank you for answering my summons so quickly, Lord Thayne," Catherine Crowell said, smiling kindly at the handsome young man who had just bowed over her hand. "And you too of course, Lord Randson. Won't you be seated?"

Both gentlemen selected chairs facing their hostess.

"Richard said you particularly wished to speak to us, ma'am," Thayne said. "Can we be of service to you in some way?"

"I hope, rather, to be of service to both of you. Am I correct in assuming that your courtship of the twins has been unsuccessful this past week?"

Randson moaned softly. "Miss Chloe won't even agree to see me," he muttered. "Didn't know any female could be so stubborn. Begging your pardon, ma'am."

Catherine bit her lower lip and nodded. "Yes. I fear stubbornness is one of Chloe's most annoying faults. However, I believe she does have some reason to doubt the steadfastness of your feelings, Lord Randson. Am I correct?"

Randson flushed but did not lower his gaze. "You refer to the occasion in Bath when I snubbed her. I was a fool, ma'am. I came to realize that I had misjudged Chloe, but I suppose it is too much to hope she can ever trust me again."

"But you did hope, I believe, to impress her with your willingness to marry her after the two of you were seen in a compromising situation."

"It was not a question of my being willing, ma'am. I had wanted to marry Miss Chloe long before then. However, I will admit that after Tweeksby saw us together in that blasted inn, I assumed she would agree to marry me. I planned to spend the rest of my life proving to her how trustworthy I really am."

Catherine regarded him solemnly for long seconds before nodding her head. "I believe you, Lord Randson. However, my opinion is not important here. We must discover a way to make Chloe believe you. Have you told her that you love her?"

"Of course. I told her right after I proposed to her."

"And that was soon after the two of you were seen in a compromising situation?"

"Yes, ma'am."

“Hmm, I see.” Catherine turned to Thayne, who immediately raised his eyebrows and spoke before his hostess could pose a question.

“No, Mrs. Crowell. I have not yet found an opportunity to tell Miss Beatrice I love her. She does not refuse to see me, but she does refuse to give me an opportunity to speak of anything but the most commonplace things. However, based on what Aunt Henrietta has told me, Miss Beatrice will always suspect that any declaration of love or proposal of marriage on my part would be based on my desire to do the honorable thing.”

“There has been entirely too much talk about honor in this affair,” Randson complained.

“I could not agree more, Lord Randson,” Catherine replied, smiling.

“Really?”

“Of course. Honor is not lacking here. But something else is. Something that is of much greater importance to the twins than honor.”

Thayne scooted forward on his chair. “And that would be?”

“Romance, of course.”

Both men opened their mouths, but neither appeared capable of speech.

Catherine Crowell laughed aloud. “I see I have shocked you gentlemen. If you will allow me to explain—”

A soft knock interrupted Catherine. Three heads turned toward the door, which the butler had just opened. “Forgive the intrusion, ma’am,” Collier said, “but Lord Thayne’s mother has arrived and is requesting to see you immediately.”

It took close to an hour to acquaint the marchioness with most of the details about the events that had taken place while she was at Chiloath overseeing the convalescence of the housekeeper.

“I cannot believe I was not notified when my only son was shot down,” Lady Thayne exclaimed when the last of the tale had been told. “I could almost shoot you myself, Nicholas, for leaving me at Chiloath while you lay wounded in a stranger’s bed.”

Thayne reached to pat her hand soothingly. “I was never in any danger, Mother. At least not after Miss Beatrice managed to get the Mellises to take me in. And you can hardly blame me for not getting a message to you while I was lying unconscious on the forest floor.”

“Nevertheless... Well, I shall not scold any more since I can see for myself that you suffered no permanent injuries. Thank heavens for Mrs. Mellis’s nursing skills and for Beatrice’s resourcefulness. I can never repay that dear girl for what she did for you, Nicholas. Where is

she, anyway?"

"She and Miss Chloe have promised to stay with Aunt Henrietta for a few more days—on Henrietta's request, I might add. Knowing my dear aunt, I fear some plot is brewing, but I have no idea what it may be."

"Plot? Apparently I have not been told everything yet. Why should —"

Conversation inside the drawing room was interrupted a second time that afternoon, but this interruption did not come in the form of a polite knock by the butler. Rather, the door was thrust open with a violence that startled all inside. Thayne and Randson leapt to their feet while the two ladies gasped in unison.

A tall man strode into the room. He still wore his riding clothes, which were liberally coated with dust, and his boots clattered loudly on the parquet floor. His bleak, dark eyes swept the room impatiently, but their expression softened appreciably when his gaze at last paused on Catherine Crowell's face.

"Jonathan," Catherine whispered.

"My dearest Cathy." The man strode to her and dropped to his knees beside her chair. He seemed not to notice that anyone else was in the room as he clasped her hands and lifted them to his lips. "I have been so worried about you, my love."

"Jonathan, Jonathan," Catherine repeated, reclaiming a hand to lay it lovingly against his cheek.

Thayne glanced at his mother, then caught Randson's eye. The three stood and slipped quietly from the room.

"There is no reason for you and Randson to stay at the Old Ship now that Jonathan and I have arrived," Lady Thayne said as she escorted her son and Randson to the front door. "The house is large enough for all of us."

"Perhaps, Mother, but Randson and I are quite comfortable where we are. Besides, we might not be good company at the present time. We, ah, we have some problems to deal with in the near future."

Lady Thayne raised her eyebrows. "Beatrice and Chloe?" she asked.

"Mother?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Is romance extremely important to young ladies?"

The marchioness bit her lip. "Romance is extremely important to all ladies, regardless of their ages, Nicholas."

"More important than, let us say, honor?"

"Infinitely."

They had arrived at the front door, which a footman quickly opened. Lady Thayne moved out onto the steps with the two young men.

"I have to admit I'm a bit confused, Lady Thayne," Randson said, a frown furrowing his brow. "Is there a difference between love and romance?"

"Oh yes, Randson." She bent to pluck a bloom from the rose bush growing beside the front stoop. "You see, romance is what gives love its flavor. For example, if a rose had no fragrance, it would be no less beautiful, no less delicate. But it would certainly be less enjoyable. Do you see what I mean?"

"No," Randson said baldly.

"What she means, my friend," said Thayne, a resigned expression upon his face, "is that we are going to have to go along with Aunt Henrietta's plan."

"But there isn't any balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, Lady Henrietta," Randson objected two days later. He and Thayne were seated in Henrietta's book room listening to her explain her plan in greater detail. "No doubt you've forgotten that Juliet was at a window, not on a balcony."

"No, nodcock. I have forgotten nothing about my dearest Will's most romantic play. The trouble with you, Randson, is that you're too literal-minded. No female likes a man who is literal-minded."

"I'm not literal-minded," Randson objected. "I just prefer that things be done right. Don't care for these flights of fancy."

Henrietta's face flushed. "If you think I can maneuver two full-grown girls into a single window and then arrange for two men to climb up to that one window at the same time, well, that's what I call a *real* flight of fancy."

Thayne decided it was time to intervene before his aunt and his best friend came to blows. "Aunt Henrietta is right, Randson. Now don't jump down my throat. I'm sure you are correct about the window scene, but she is certainly right about the staging. A window simply wouldn't work."

"I won't have to play that death scene, will I?" Randson inquired, having found something new to worry about. "I've hated that death scene ever since I saw Romeo Coates do it in Bath. I know the man was an amateur, but even an amateur should know better than to take off his hat and use it for a pillow to lay his head on after he had drunk poison. The whole blasted audience was in convulsions, calling out, 'Die again, Romeo, die again', and I'll be damned if he didn't. Hopped to his feet and started dying all over again. Then, after squirming

about on the stage for a while, he finally found a comfortable position to die in for the second time, and the audience started yelling, 'Die again, Romeo'."

"How long did this go on," Thayne asked, fascinated.

"Until Juliet climbed out of her tomb, walked to the front of the stage and told the audience, 'Dying is such sweet sorrow, That he will die again tomorrow'."

Thayne had been laughing for several seconds before he noticed that his aunt's face was turning an alarming shade of purple. He quickly sobered and cleared his throat. "Don't concern yourself with the death scene, Randson. Aunt Henrietta wants us doing only the window—I mean the balcony—scene. Even you must see some romance in that particular scene."

"I suppose so, but personally, I think my first line should be, 'I ne'er saw true beauty 'til this night.' After all, Miss Chloe is the most beauti—"

"Bah!" Henrietta interrupted. "That would not be appropriate at all. Romeo says that line the first time he sees Juliet, and you've seen Chloe dozens of times."

"Now who is being literal-minded?"

Thayne groaned. If he didn't love Beatrice so much, he would be tempted to throw up his hands and flee straight back to London and sanity. Unfortunately, he had to admit that there had been little enough of the romantic in his associations with Beatrice, and if she wanted romance...

"Very well, Randson." Henrietta sighed. "If you wish to say that line, you can do so. It can't hurt, I suppose, but you must promise to be guided by me for your remaining lines. I've given you some of the best, such as, 'It is my lady, O, it is my love!' Is that agreeable?"

"That's a good line," Randson said, nodding. "But I shouldn't hog all the good ones. What does Thayne get to say?"

"Yes, I would be interested in knowing that myself."

"He will say, 'But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Beatrice is the sun.'"

"Hmmm," Randson said thoughtfully. "Should we change that to, 'What light through yonder balcony breaks?'"

"No, nodcock. A window will be behind them, and the light will be coming through that. Besides, we can't start changing my dear Will's words. That wouldn't be right."

"But you changed 'Juliet' to 'Beatrice' I noticed. Besides, I had rather hoped I could have those lines."

"Well you can't, because 'Beatrice' is three syllables long, just like 'Juliet'. 'Chloe' wouldn't fit as well."

"You have a point," Randson conceded. "Very well, Thayne can have that speech. Thayne? Why are you muttering lines from the end of the play? You've already said we aren't doing the death scene."

Thayne took a deep breath. "True, but the thought of drinking poison suddenly seemed very appealing to me."

Randson shook his head. "Sometimes I worry about you, my friend." Then, shrugging, he turned back to their hostess. "I say, Lady Henrietta. We won't have to wear tights or anything like that, will we? I don't mind making a fool of myself spouting lines from Shakespeare below a balcony instead of a window if that will help me win Miss Chloe, but I'm not wearing tights."

"No, no. No tights, I promise you. But I was planning on having some nice tunics made up for you. You can't object to wearing a tunic, can you?"

Randson pondered for a few seconds. "I suppose a tunic would be all right. What do you think, Thayne?"

"Tunics are fine. Aunt Henrietta, when is this, ah, entertainment to take place?"

"On Saturday evening, if you gentlemen can learn your lines by then. In the meantime, I suggest that neither of you try to visit the young ladies again. It will do no harm if they begin to wonder whether you have given up and gone away."

"That could make our appearances as Romeo even more impressive," Randson said. "Yes, I think that is a wonderful idea."

"In that case, gentlemen, I suggest you go back to the inn and begin memorizing your lines. I have them all written out for you. I don't want the girls to know you have been here this morning, so slip out the side door the way you came in."

"But shouldn't we have some sort of rehearsal?" Thayne asked. "I don't even know which of your balconies we are using as a prop."

"Hmm. That is a point. Very well. Arrive an hour early on Saturday evening. I shall find some way to ensure that the twins are kept busy until time for them to make their appearance on the balcony. While they are occupied, I'll show you gentlemen to your positions and point out the ropes you are to use in climbing up to the balcony. I plan to have the ropes covered in ivy so the girls won't suspect anything until you begin your ascent."

"Your plan seems quite thorough, Aunt Henrietta," Thayne said, grimacing. "If this does not convince the twins that Randson and I really love them, I cannot imagine anything that would."

"Oh they'll be convinced, never fear," Henrietta exclaimed with a smug air. "Now run along, boys. I have much to do between now and Saturday."

Thayne took a step, then turned back to watch his aunt hurry from the room. "I wonder if she..." he murmured to himself.

Randson paused at his side. "Why are you frowning, Thayne? Is something amiss?"

Thayne shook his head. "I wondered for a minute if my aunt might be hiding something from us but I can't imagine what it would be. No doubt I worry too much. Come, let's return to the Old Ship and start practicing our lines."

Chapter Twenty-One

“Do you think Lord Randson has given up, Bea? He hasn’t tried to see me in three days now. Perhaps I have finally won.”

Beatrice sat up in bed and hugged her knees. Dawn was just breaking, and her chamber was still quite dim. “Open the draperies, Chloe, will you please?” she said, stretching and rubbing her eyes.

Chloe obeyed and then hurried back to her sister’s bed. “Scoot over, Bea. I want to sit down.”

“I want to lie down and go back to sleep if possible.” Beatrice glared at her sister, but she also scooted toward the center of the bed. “What are you doing up so early, Chloe?”

Chloe lifted one shoulder. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“And so you decided I had no right to do so either? Very well, dear. I’m awake now but I don’t remember what you asked me. What was it?”

“Do you think perhaps I have finally won and Lord Randson has given up on me?”

“If so, you don’t look particularly happy about it. Chloe, dear, why don’t you just go ahead and accept Lord Randson’s proposal? I am sure he loves you, and I believe you would have a happy marriage.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Of course. I know Lord Randson is not perfect, but then neither are you, dear. You know in your heart that Lord Randson loves you. You are simply being stubborn again.”

“Oh Bea, I believe you may be right—about my stubbornness, I mean. It is one of my most oppressing faults. If Lord Randson calls today, I shall see him, and if he proposes again, I shall accept.”

“That is wonderful, dear. Now why don’t we both go back to sleep?”

“But Bea, we have not solved your problem yet. You have not said you will accept Lord Thayne’s proposal.”

“That is because I have no intention of doing so. Lord Thayne has never given me any indication that he loves me.”

Chloe sighed. “We are back to your compromising situation again, are we not? But dearest, I suppose we really should give some serious consideration to our reputations.”

“No, Chloe, you are not going to cajole me into accepting Lord Thayne simply because you have decided to accept Lord Randson.

After all, my compromising situation was not nearly as serious as yours. I am certain that word of my spending the night with Lord Thayne will never reach London, whereas your being alone with Lord Randson in an inn may very well be an *on dit* even as we speak.”

“Oh no,” Chloe said on a gasp. “I had not considered that. Everyone will think I am marrying Lord Randson merely to salvage my reputation. The poor thing. I cannot do that to him.”

Beatrice clenched her teeth. “You are not thinking clearly, Chloe. You know that Lord Randson has never cared what the *ton* thinks.”

“But his mother has. She will hate me.”

“She would likely hate you anyway. I hear she is extremely jealous of her son.”

Chloe threw her arms around her sister in an enthusiastic hug. “Thank you, Bea. You have saved me from making a horrible mistake. Now I see that I can never marry Lord Randson.”

“Bother,” Beatrice muttered, pulling the covers up over her head.

Later that morning when the girls joined Henrietta at the breakfast table, they found her in an unusually good mood. “What a lovely Saturday,” she chirped. Her smile was broad. “Do you girls have any plans for the day?”

Chloe stared morosely at her untouched eggs, so it was left to Beatrice to answer. “Mama has asked us to visit her this morning. She is feeling so much better, she wants to try a short shopping trip, and Chloe and I are to accompany her.”

“That is marvelous! And what about the remainder of the day?”

“I had supposed we would spend it with Mama. Did you need us for something, my lady?”

“Actually, yes. Do you recall that Mr. Pimm offered to take the three of us on a tour of the Pavilion?”

“I do recall his mentioning it, yes.”

“He called on me yesterday to inform me that he has completed the arrangements and the tour is scheduled for late this afternoon. I fear he went to a great deal of trouble, so...”

“In that case, we shall certainly return in time to be ready when he calls for us. At what hour is the tour scheduled?”

“Hmm, now let me see. I think... Yes, around six, he said. Perhaps you girls should return to the house by five.”

“Very well. Would you like to accompany us today, my lady? I am sure Mama would be delighted to see you again.”

“No, no. Thank you, dear, but I have much too much to do here today. Yes, much too much. But give your mother my regards, will

you? Now I must get busy. I shall see you both at five o'clock." She hurried out of the room.

"Beatrice?" Chloe said. It was the first word she had spoken since the sisters had come downstairs for breakfast.

"Yes, dear?"

"What shall I do if we should run into Lord Randson today?"

"You will say, 'Good morning, Lord Randson. A lovely day, is it not?'"

"Be serious, Bea."

"I am being serious. Your only other option would be to say, 'Good morning, Lord Randson. I can never marry you because of what people might think about my motives for doing so and because your mother might be jealous of me'."

Chloe clenched her teeth and glared at her sister. "Sometimes, Bea, you are infuriating." Sticking her chin into the air, Chloe rose and stalked from the room.

"And sometimes, my dear, intelligent sister," Beatrice muttered to herself, "you are a peagoose."

Beatrice and Chloe were exhausted by the time they returned to Henrietta's late that afternoon. Although their mother had chosen to be transported about town in a chair, she had managed to enter at least half the shops in Brighton and had appeared to enjoy herself thoroughly. The sea air, she had decided, was also contributing to the return of her health.

At least Chloe had been spared the ignominy of meeting Randson and not knowing what to say to him. Although both girls had scanned the faces around them all day, neither had glimpsed the man she most wished to see and simultaneously wished to avoid.

"Thank goodness we are home," Chloe said on a sigh of relief when she and Beatrice stepped into Henrietta's entrance hall. "Do we have time for a nap, do you suppose?"

Beatrice bit back the words that trembled on the tip of her tongue, realizing that nothing would be gained by pointing out to Chloe that a nap would not be necessary had she not gotten them both up so early that morning. "I don't know," she said. "Perhaps we could at least lie down for a few minutes. Let's find Lady Henrietta and ask her."

Henrietta had just entered the house through a side door and overheard their conversation. "Certainly, girls," she said with a smile. "Our tour has been delayed by half an hour, anyway. I insist you both go to your chambers and lie down. Don't concern yourselves with the time. I will arouse you at the proper hour."

"That's wonderful," Chloe said, her shoulders drooping. "I want to

sleep as long as possible.”

“And so you shall, child,” Henrietta said, stepping between the twins to grasp each one by the arm and guide them toward the stairway. “Hurry up to your beds, now, and don’t worry about a thing until I come to fetch you.”

“Chloe, wake up,” Beatrice yelled, shaking her sleeping sister. “It is almost nine o’clock.”

Chloe sat straight up in bed. “Oh Bea! How terrible of us to oversleep so. And after all Lady Henrietta has done for us. But why did she not awaken us?”

“Perhaps she tried and could not. You know how difficult we can be when we are extremely tired. I do hope she went on the tour without us. After all, she said Mr. Pimm had gone to a great deal of trouble. The poor man! I feel so badly about—”

A brief knock on Chloe’s door preceded Henrietta’s entrance. Smiling broadly, she quickly waved aside the twins’ attempts to apologize.

“Now girls, calm down. I did not even try to awaken you. There was no need. Mr. Pimm sent word that the tour had to be cancelled. Something about fireworks on the Pavilion lawn. Why don’t you get dressed, join me for a light repast and we’ll watch the fireworks from the balcony?”

“That sounds nice,” Beatrice agreed, thankful that she and Chloe had not unwittingly spoiled Mr. Pimm’s plans for them. “We shall dress and be downstairs soon.”

“Don’t dress up, girls. Something sweet—I mean simple—will be fine. ‘Twill just be the three of us, after all.”

“Yes, Lady Henrietta,” Chloe agreed. “We won’t be long.”

“What time will the fireworks begin?” Beatrice asked half an hour later when she and Chloe had joined Henrietta in the small dining room.

“Yes, I’m looking forward to them,” Chloe added. “Can you really see them from your balcony?”

“Certainly. They are scheduled for ten o’clock. Hurry, girls, we would not want to miss the beginning.”

Beatrice and Chloe exchanged amused glances. From the bright flush on Henrietta’s face and the preoccupied manner in which she was crumbling her roll, it appeared that she was looking forward to the fireworks even more than they.

“Here we are, girls. This balcony is perfect for our entertainment tonight.” Henrietta had led the twins through the house and into an unused bedchamber. A brace of candles already burned on a table

near the window.”

Are you certain this is an appropriate balcony, Lady Henrietta?” Beatrice asked. “I may be turned around a bit, but I was under the impression that Brighton would be in the opposite direction.”

“This is the right place, Beatrice,” Henrietta said, throwing open the doors to the balcony and pushing both girls out ahead of her. “Stand up close to the railing there and be very quiet. The entertainment will start soon. I have just recalled a small matter that needs my attention. I shall return in a few moments.” She was gone before either Beatrice or Chloe had an opportunity to say another word.

The twins stood silently for several seconds, looking up into the evening sky. The stars were beginning to come out and a soft breeze ruffled the leaves on the ivy growing up the stone walls.

“Such a lovely evening,” Chloe said wistfully. “If only I could share this with Lord Randson.”

“You could if you would stop being so stubborn. You and Lord Randson love each other. That is what is important, not what people will say and not how his mother may feel toward you.”

“You have no right to lecture me, Bea. You love Lord Thayne and I am convinced he loves you in return.”

“The night air must be affecting your brain, Chloe.”

“It is not. If you must know, I sometimes slipped into that tiny chamber next to the entrance hall when I knew Lord Randson and the marquess would be calling. That, of course, was when I was refusing to see Lord Randson. When they arrived, I would crack the door a bit and peep through. I saw the way the marquess looked at you when you were not aware he was observing you. I could swear I saw deep regard in his gaze.”

“Do you really think so?” Beatrice asked. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

“I really do. I suspect that his regard for you has grown as he has come to appreciate your finer qualities.”

Beatrice’s smile faded. “If only I could be sure of his feelings.”

Chloe sighed. “I know. In fact, despite my trepidations about Lord Randson’s mother, I’d be inclined to accept his proposal if only he could demonstrate his feelings for me.”

“How do you propose he do that? There are no dragons left to slay, you know.”

“Don’t be silly, Bea. You must realize that I don’t expect any deeds of valor. But some sort of action would be nice.”

“To say ‘some sort of action’ is not very specific, Chloe. In fact... that’s strange.”

“It is not strange! I am simply trying—”

“No, not you. I was referring to that light that seems to be moving about on the lawn below us.”

Chloe looked in the direction of Beatrice’s pointing finger. “Why, it’s Lady Henrietta and Martha carrying large braces of candles. What can they be doing?”

“They’re coming this way. Oh no, Chloe. Look! There are two brawny men directly below us. They must have been planning to break into the house. And Aunt Henrietta is walking right toward them.” She began waving her arms in a frantic crossing motion. “Go back, Henrietta,” she shouted. “Go back!”

“She doesn’t seem to hear you, Bea. She’s coming straight ahead. What shall we do?”

“Listen. Henrietta is trying to tell us something in a loud whisper. She seems to be saying, ‘Go ahead’. What do you suppose she means?”

“I don’t know, but one of the thieves just cleared his throat.”

“And the other one just started laughing hysterically. Good heavens, Chloe. They must be crazed. Look in the chamber behind us and see if you can find something heavy that we could drop on their heads.”

Chloe turned and ran into the bedchamber.

Beatrice stayed at her post, gesturing toward Henrietta and her maid to go back as the laughter of one of the thieves grew in intensity and the other began shouting, as though trying to make himself heard over his cohort’s hilarity, “‘With love’s light wings did I o’erperch these walls, For stony limits cannot hold love out’.”

“Wrong lines, nodcock,” Henrietta hissed. “That part comes while you’re climbing the ropes.”

“Here, Bea,” Chloe said, dashing back onto the balcony. “I could find only this chamber pot and a vase. Shall we try them?”

Beatrice reached for the chamber pot. “I am positive the one thief is mad,” she whispered. “Listen to his maniacal laughter. And the other is spouting Shakespeare!”

“Shakespeare? Dear heavens!”

“Yes, is it not terrifying?”

“We had better aim carefully if we are to save Lady Henrietta. Both thieves are directly below us. I’ll take the one on the left. You aim for the one on our right.”

“Very well. Together now!” Both girls stepped forward.

Henrietta glanced up and saw the twins at the railing with their weapons raised high above their heads. “Drop to the ground, men,” she yelled.

Thayne was never sure whether he heeded Henrietta's words or whether he simply fell because he was so weak from laughing. In either case, he took Randson with him, and the chamber pot and Wedgwood vase struck their thick tunics and bounced away, both still intact.

"Blast, Chloe," Randson yelled, incensed. "What are you doing, flinging things at me when I'm trying to be romantic?"

"Edward?" Chloe gasped. "Is that you?"

"It isn't Romeo. Who did you think it was?"

"We thought you were thieves," Beatrice called to the two prone men. "What are you doing?"

Thayne finally managed to stop laughing and scramble to his feet. "We are trying to be romantic so you will believe us when we say we love you," he called, looking upward. "Wait there. We'll climb up and explain."

"No," Henrietta shrieked. "You can't climb up. The ropes are rigged."

"What do you mean, Aunt Henrietta?"

Henrietta hung her head. "I cut them almost in two. I wanted you and Randson to fall when you got part of the way up to the balcony. Then the girls would think you were hurt and come dashing down to clutch you to their bosoms and tell you how much they loved you."

"We could have been killed."

"No you couldn't. That's why I had your tunics made so thick. They would have cushioned your fall."

Thayne rolled his eyes toward the heavens. Then he smiled. "Never mind. At least I now know that Beatrice returns my love. I overheard Chloe saying so."

"Well, I've know that Chloe loved me all along, but she still wouldn't marry me any more than Miss Beatrice would marry you," Randson pointed out. He looked up. "Chloe, what were you saying to your sister about deeds?"

Chloe leaned over the balcony. "You've proven your love to me tonight, my dear. By the way, you make a charming Romeo."

Randson grinned. "I do, don't I? Now will you come down here so we can talk about the future?"

Thayne also looked up. "Beatrice, would you come down too? Please, my little honeybee?"

Beatrice's grin was broader than Chloe's. "What about my stinger?" she called.

"I'll risk it. I would risk anything—even looking the biggest fool in creation—to be in your good graces."

“We’ll be right there,” Chloe called. Both girls turned and sped into the house.

Henrietta sighed, blowing her breath out in a sound of extreme frustration. “All my plans,” she moaned. “Destroyed, turned into a mockery.”

Thayne slipped his arm around Henrietta’s shoulders. “But your plan worked. Both Randson and I are about to win the ladies we love.”

“Yes, but there was nothing romantic about it.”

“Don’t fret, Lady Henrietta,” Randson said, stepping up to pat her rather awkwardly on the arm. “As your dearest Will would have said, ‘*All’s Well That Ends Well*’.”

“Shut up, nodcock,” Henrietta snarled, turning to stomp into the house while Beatrice and Chloe dashed out, flying into the eager arms of their Romeos.

Epilogue

London, four months later

"I'm sorry, Richard, but the War Office refuses to admit that any ciphers were ever being smuggled out of the country."

Richard Crowell looked up from his breakfast and into the concerned countenance of one of his new brothers-in-law. "No need for *you* to apologize, Thayne, but I appreciate the thought."

Although Richard had successfully completed his mission and returned Captain Balcorn to English soil to stand trial as a traitor, he had not yet finished all of the paperwork required by the War Office and thus had not yet vacated his dilapidated rooms in London. He waved an arm toward a chair across the table from him. "Sit down. You might as well join me. Not that you have much choice. Here comes Marshall with a mug of ale for you, and he would be devastated should you refuse."

Marshall marched into the room, mug in hand and a smile of welcome on his face. Somehow Marshall had gotten it into his head that Thayne had saved Beatrice's life rather than the other way around and he had vowed his undying devotion to Beatrice's new husband. He deposited the ale on the table, bowed and asked Thayne to pass along his regards to the new Lady Thayne. Then he turned and hurried from the room.

Thayne called his thanks to Marshall's back, then stepped around the table and pulled out a rickety chair. He eyed it for a second before gingerly taking a seat.

Richard looked at him and raised his brows. "I must say, you look a bit harried today. Is Beatrice already driving you to distraction?"

Thayne's expression softened appreciably. "Beatrice is behaving wonderfully, thank you very much. She loves Chiloath, especially since it is close to Randson's estate, enabling her and Chloe to visit each other practically every day. Both ladies, I understand, are making plans to return to London to visit my mother and the shops. Now Richard, as I was saying—"

"And Randson? Have you talked with him lately? Has dear little Chloe murdered her new mother-in-law yet?"

"Have you not heard? When Randson told the dowager countess about the near miraculous recovery your mother made while staying in Brighton, his mother decided to move to Brighton permanently. I understand that Aunt Henrietta has taken the Dowager Lady Randson

under her wing. Both ladies have a great deal in common, you see. After all, it was from his mother that Randson learned his love of literature.”

Richard leaned back in his chair and smiled. “It sounds as though all of you newlyweds are well and happily settled. Why, then, do you look so morose?”

“Do you not understand, Richard? Since the War Office will not admit that it experienced a problem with encoded information being sent out of the country, they can hardly admit to your having played an important role in apprehending those who were responsible. Thus, everyone in London will continue to think of you as a dissipated and irresponsible rake.”

Richard laid down his fork and grinned. “Thank you, my dear friend, for your concern, but you see, I do not care what anyone in London thinks of me. I have had enough of London to last me a lifetime, and the people I love already know what I am—and what I am not.”

“But what will you do with yourself then?”

“Go back to Crowell Manor, of course. I cannot tell you how much I have missed that place. Besides, now that Mama’s health is so improved, I hope she and my father will travel some. There is no reason they should not. I can oversee the estate in my father’s absence.”

“But Richard?”

“Yes, my worried friend?”

“Will not even your neighbors around Crowell Manor shun you?”

“Shun me? We are talking, my friend, about the villagers of Little Chilton. They will greet me as their savior. After all, you and Randson have removed their two favorite topics of conversation—the twins. Little Chilton needs me now, just as I need Little Chilton.”

Thayne shrugged and then smiled. “If that is what makes you happy, then I will be happy for you.” He lifted his ale in a toast. “To Little Chilton.”

“To Little Chilton,” Richard echoed, hoisting his mug of ale into the air. “May their obsession with the Crowell family never wane.”

A Note from the Author

Thank you for making time to read *Compromising Situations*. I hope you enjoyed it and that you will want to read more of my books. Based on feedback I've received, many readers enjoy my contemporary Barbourville books, a continuing series set in a fictional small town in Tennessee. The first in the series, *A Summer Sentence*, was a finalist in the HOLT Medallion contest and in the Gayle Wilson Award of Excellence contest as well as placing first in the traditional category of the Romance Writers Ink contest. Others in the series have won or placed in prestigious contests. Most recently, *The Forgotten Christmas Tree* took first place in the 2014 HOLT Medallion contest.

I would love for you to visit my website at www.CarolynnCarey.com and to touch base with me on [www.Facebook.com/carolynncarey](https://www.facebook.com/carolynncarey). I also enjoy emails from readers (cc@carolynncarey.com). I hope to hear from you soon.

If you enjoyed this book and would like to know when new releases are coming out, please sign up for my newsletter by clicking on this link: <http://mad.ly/signups/118022/join>

Thank you!